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Panasonic TVs on parade, p18

WELCOME



I remember no more than a decade ago buying a 28in TV. Such a screen size would no longer get a look in *chez* Craven, and judging by sales figures, it wouldn't in your house either. Our desire now is for ever-bigger displays. This, if you ask me, is a Good Thing.

With this in mind, I was a little deflated when Panasonic's new plasma, the reference-grade, best-in-breed, so-good-it-comes-with-a-signed-booklet ZT60 (see p18) was confirmed as only being offered in a 60in iteration. Sure, **60in is large in TV terms, but more gargantuan displays are available** – and when you're claiming to have developed the greatest flatscreen known to man, and charging a lot for it, I would have expected an even bigger size. After all, those spending £4,000 on a TV can probably afford a couple grand more to blag some extra inches. No doubt there are production reasons behind the choice of 60in, but I wouldn't be surprised to see next year's model (if we get one) spreading its wings a bit. Big is, after all, best.

Mark Craven



MENU









Contributors



John Archer: The UK's most experienced TV tester cut his teeth as an early *HCC* staffer



Richard Stevenson: Industry veteran and former Editor of UK CE trade journal *ERT*



Steve May: *HCC*'s former Editor-in-Chief is one of the UK's most respected AV journos



Martin Pipe Technical expert Martin is renown throughout the home cinema industry



Adam Rayner: The UK's foremost expert in extreme audio writes about bass, hi-fi and cartoons



Adrian Justins: Made his name as the editor of *What Video & TV* and *What Home Cinema*

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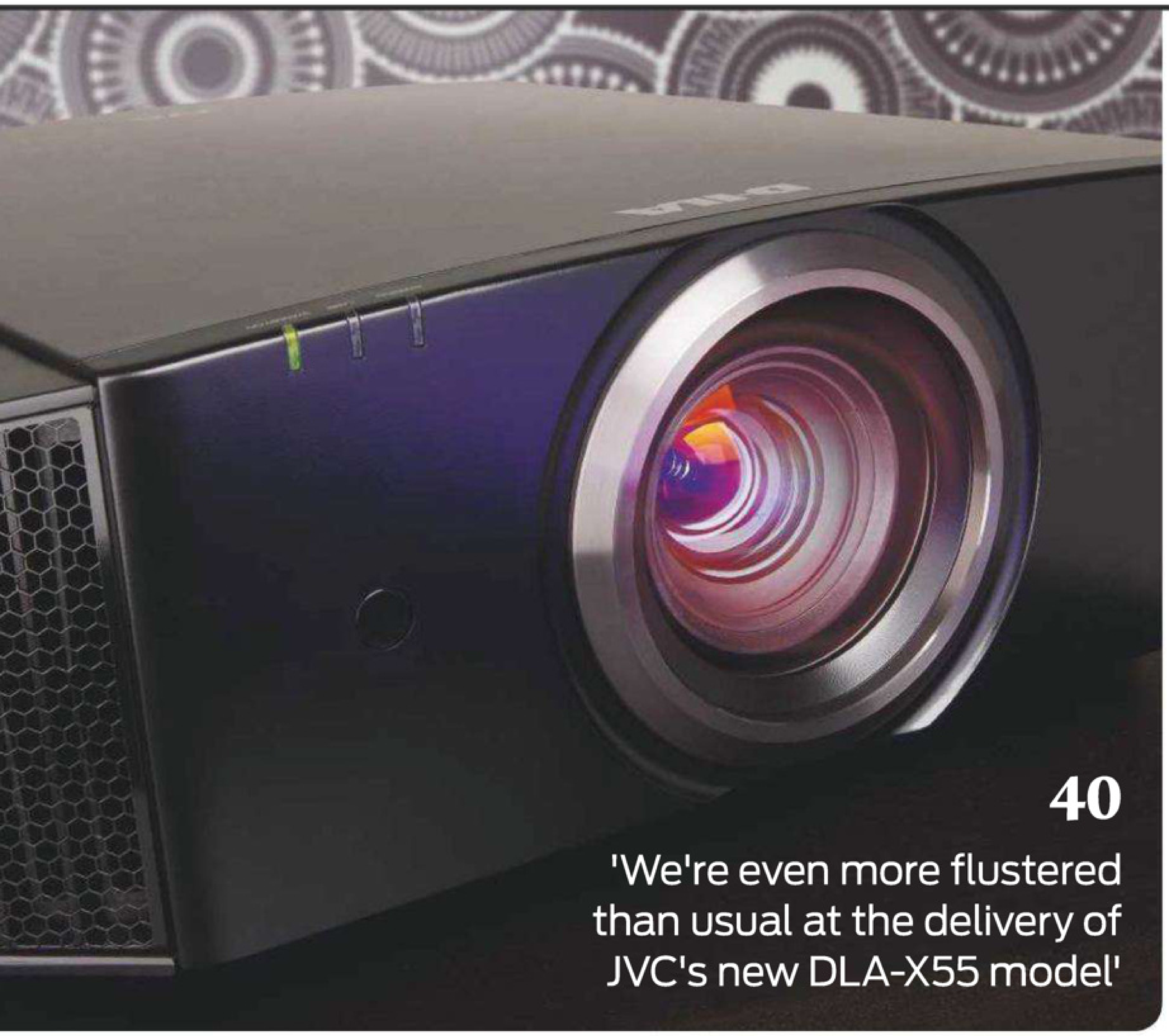
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'We're even more flustered than usual at the delivery of JVC's new DLA-X55 model'











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BULLETIN

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Space invader

Sony BDV-N7100W → www.sony.co.uk



Sony's latest top-of-the-line 5.1 home cinema system has certainly caught our eye. Not only does the strikingly-designed array offer 4K video upscaling, the BDV-N7100W also deploys brand-new speaker technology that uses an advanced ferrofluid material developed by NASA. Equally intriguing is the promise of a 'Football Mode', which uses acoustic data captured at a Brazilian football ground to, Sony claims, 'recreate the stadium thrill with all-round sound'. *Excelente*!

HCC Online...

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Audiophile accuracy

Tannoy Precision → www.tannoy.co.uk

Say 'hello' to the star of Tannoy's latest luxury loudspeaker range. The imposing Precision 6.4 floorstander combines a new 6in Dual Concentric driver with a matching 6in bass driver and a pair of auxiliary bass radiators. The range also includes the smaller Precision 6.2 floorstander and 6C centre (inset), plus the Precision 6.1 standmount. Prices run between £900 and £2,400 depending on the model and choice of finish.

StoreMags

Italian luxury



FrontRow is aiming to add some Continental style to the UK's home cinemas with its new Prima seating range. Manufactured in Italy, these luxury leather seats are available in three different modules allowing you to configure anything from a single chair to multiple rows – with prices starting at £2,300. And they don't just look the part; the seats also conceal some handy technology, including an LED-lit drinks chiller and an electronic recliner/footrest controlled discretely from the rim of the cup holder.
www.frontrow-seating.co.uk

Surrealist speaker



Dali has introduced a new high-end bookshelf speaker. The Epicon 2 is not only the company's most compact cabinet to date, it's also the first to feature woofers developed and manufactured in Dali's Danish factory. The Epicon 2 uses non-parallel cabinet walls constructed from six-layer MDF panels to eliminate standing waves; gold-plated, precision-tooled binding posts; and a choice of three real wood finishes (Black, Ruby Macassar and Walnut). They can be yours for around £3,750 per pair.
www.dali-uk.co.uk

Phasing out crosstalk



Audio crosstalk can be a problem in soundbars due to the proximity of the left and right speakers, but it's a problem that GoldenEar Technology hopes to have cracked with the 3D image optimisation wizardry implemented in its new £1,000 SuperCinema 3D Array soundbar. So, along with the usual L/C/R speakers, the SC3DA also boasts an outer pair of 'cancellation' drivers that operate out of phase with the main L/R drivers (the outer-left being reverse-phased with the main right driver and vice versa).
www.goldenear.com

Bluetooth and big bass

Orbitsound's next-gen soundbars let their subwoofers off the leash

UK audio specialist Orbitsound has taken the wraps off its latest generation of soundbars, announcing two models that are due on sale now. The popular T12 and T9 have been replaced by the £400 M12 and £300 M9 respectively.

A number of significant changes have been made including the jettisoning of Apple's iPod dock in favour of A2DP Bluetooth wireless connectivity, which offers compatibility with most smartphones, tablets and computers and improves the cosmetic look of the 'bars. A control panel with status information has been added to allow greater flexibility during operation.

Passive wired subwoofers have been ditched and replaced with active subs and a 2.4GHz connection, which has been refined to produce a latency of just 0.01sec. Senior Product Manager Daniel Fletcher told *HCC* that 'the M series has a latency which is significantly faster than rival products'. This figure is achieved through efficient buffering and high gain antennas, but (depending on the amount of interference) the sub's wireless range is limited to between 10m and 15m. Users can choose from one of 10 channels in order to avoid interference.



Daniel Fletcher: 'Our wireless subwoofers have a latency which is significantly faster than rival products'

Sealed for a better midrange

The M9's subwoofer is a side-firing slim-line model, while the M12 is a downward-firing cube. Gain control on the back of each sub gives +/-10dB, with a further +/-6dB on the remote. Other major changes include an all-new power supply and the adoption of digital amplification, resulting in a power plant of 200W and 300W for the M9 and M12 respectively. Sealed boxes are now used for the 'bars, which, Fletcher claims, delivers better midrange acoustics.

Orbitsound's models are chunkier than most rival models and look arguably less appealing when placed beneath a screen. When *HCC* asked Fletcher if we're likely to see a low-profile soundbar from the company, he confirmed they are looking in to it – but the brand's unique 'spatial stereo' technology (whereby side speakers operate out of phase in the 400Hz to 2KHz range) means that, 'with no sweet spot, positioning the soundbars opposite the listener is not critical; we don't have to separate the speakers so the dimensions can be compact.'

Since it was established in 2005, Orbitsound has certainly enjoyed great success, and if our first impressions of the new models are anything to go by, that may well continue – but we'd still like to see a model that's a better aesthetic match to the width of medium-to-large flatscreen TVs...



The M12 soundbar boasts 300W of power amplification and can be yours for £400

PLAYLIST...

Team *HCC* spins up its disc picks of the month

Haywire (Region B BD)



Cult director Steven Soderbergh may be calling the shots, but it's Mixed Martial Arts star-turned-actress Gina Carano who steals the show in this stylish spy thriller.

Total Recall: Director's Cut (All-region BD)



Enjoy some high-quality lossless audio as Colin Farrell runs, jumps and shoots his way through this action-packed remake.

Doctor Who: The Ark in Space – SE (R2 DVD)



This two-disc revisit finds Tom Baker battling giant bugs on a space station. An impressive new restoration is joined by a great look at the history of *Dr. Who* novels.

Grabbers (Region B BD)



The first of this month's unplanned Richard Coyle double-bill is this solid hi-def presentation of Ireland's answer to *Tremors*.

Pusher (Region B BD)



Coyle returns in this stylish and violent UK remake of Nicolas Winding Refn's breakout film.

LOADING...

Team *HCC*'s pick of the hottest BD and DVD news

3D is Hobbit forming



Get ready to take a trip back to Middle-earth this Easter. Warner Home Video has confirmed that it will be bringing Peter Jackson's *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* to Blu-ray, 3D Blu-ray and DVD in the UK on April 8. All three releases feature the theatrical cut of the film and come with an UltraViolet Digital Copy. Extras confirmed for the Blu-ray releases include 10 production videos, five theatrical trailers and three game trailers.

Seventh heaven



Momentum Pictures has revealed that it will be releasing *In Bruges* writer Martin McDonagh's latest blood-drenched black comedy, *Seven Psychopaths*, on Blu-ray and DVD on April 15.

Schindler restored for BD



Steven Spielberg's award-winning film *Schindler's List* is coming to Blu-ray in the UK on April 8. The filmmaker himself has reportedly overseen a brand-new restoration of the film for this 20th Anniversary Edition Blu-ray release. Extras take the form of two documentaries.

Skinny speaker makes waves

KEF develops ground-breaking new enclosure for the marine AV market

Home cinema is taking to the high seas. Regular readers will be more than familiar with landlocked home theatres, but increasingly the higher end of the custom install biz is moving offshore, with some of the most inventive entertainment systems now being deployed in luxury yachts.

Simon Clare, head of marketing for Princess Yachts, told *HCC* that aquatic AV has become an essential addition to every luxury vessel. 'We're now taking video and multi-cabin sound very seriously,' he said. 'We didn't always offer great sound and vision. As a consequence, we were finding that customers were buying boats with the basic specification, and then taking them around the corner where everything was ripped out and upgraded. We don't want that. We don't like to see people taking out our wiring looms, as it affects the warranty. Just like car manufacturers, we don't want to encourage retro fits.'

To that end, audio specialist KEF has developed the world's smallest in-wall speakers. Designed specifically for deployment on Princess Yachts, the new Ci160TR is just 30mm deep yet features a 4.5in midbass driver made from lightweight aluminium, and a 1in tweeter with Tangerine Wave guide for wider sound dispersion. The new enclosure utilises KEF's Ultra Thin Bezel design, and flaunts a magnetic, weatherproof grille.





Michael Johnson: 'Meeting the criteria for a loudspeaker thin enough to fit a ship's bulkhead was an interesting problem'

Show me the way to go home...

Michael Johnson, KEF's head of marketing, says that designing this particular speaker provided a very specific engineering challenge. 'Meeting the criteria for a loudspeaker thin enough to fit a ship's bulkhead was an interesting problem. We had an intense period of R&D. We actually utilized the PCB platform itself as a base, to give strength and rigidity, and spread the components around.

'One of the things you can't do in such a narrow space is use a Uni-Q driver, but we maximised performance by having that separate midbass driver and high-frequency tweeter. The cone is pretty much flat, but it's stiffened by ribs so that it can work pistonically.' Johnson says the sound quality is unmistakably KEF. 'We wouldn't have done it if we didn't think our engineers could deliver the fidelity.'

Johnson adds that the development poured into Ci160TR will now benefit other kit for the custom installation market: 'Custom install is the one area of our business that we've seen go up and up; it's a dynamic area.'

KEF's Ci160TR was designed for use on Princess Yachts

Bigscreen home cinema on a budget

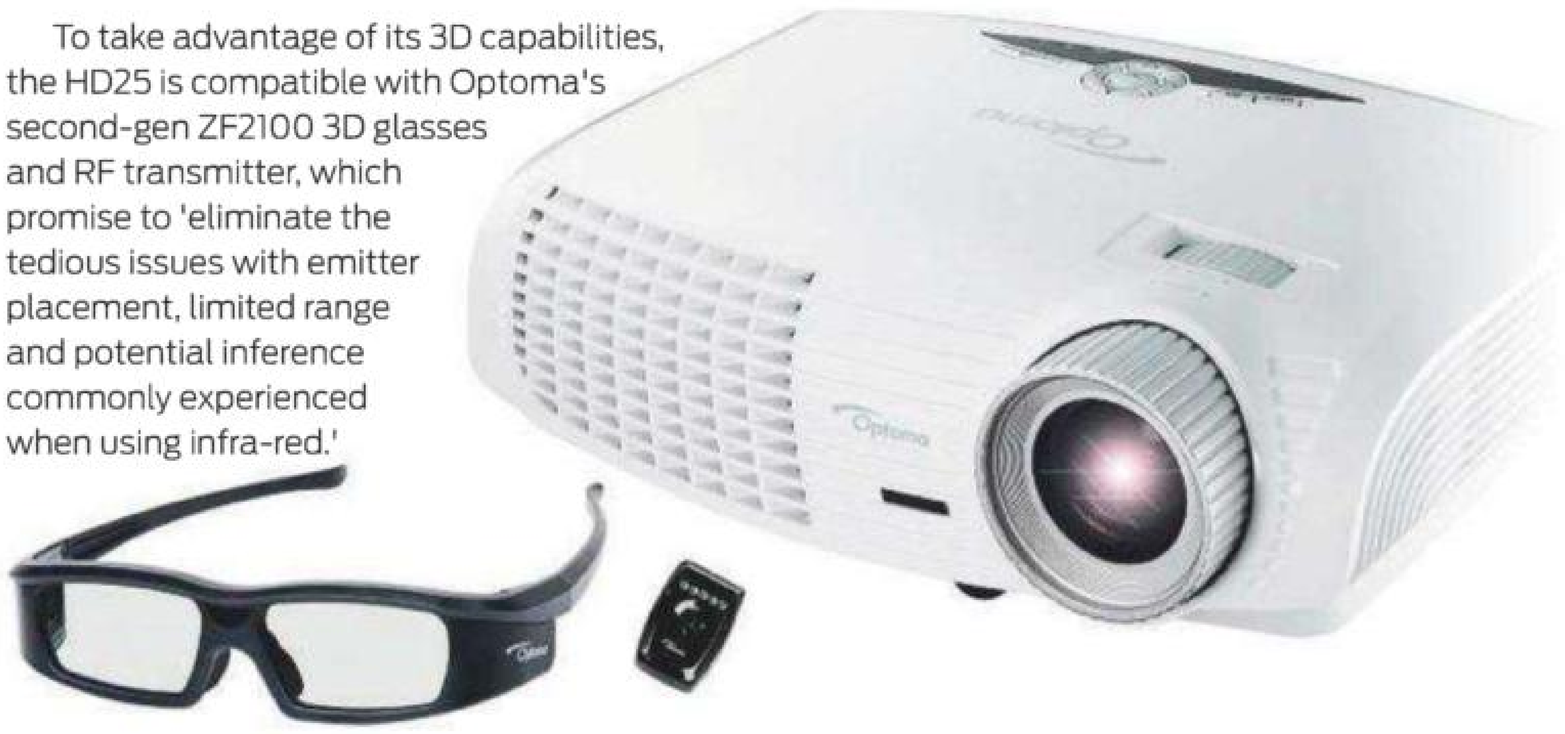
Optoma's new HD25 projector delivers Full HD 3D for only £750

Home cinema fans who have been priced out of making the jump from TV to projector are being targeted by PJ specialist Optoma – it's announced its most affordable Full HD 3D DLP projector to date, the HD25.

Arriving with a wallet-friendly price tag of just £750, the HD25 is capable of projecting a 300in image, claims an improved 20,000:1 contrast ratio, and offers 2,000 Lumens of brightness.

The HD25 also incorporates BrilliantColor picture processing technology to deliver what Optoma claims is a '50 per cent increase in colour brightness over other technologies.'

To take advantage of its 3D capabilities, the HD25 is compatible with Optoma's second-gen ZF2100 3D glasses and RF transmitter, which promise to 'eliminate the tedious issues with emitter placement, limited range and potential inference commonly experienced when using infra-red.'



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DIARY

Our calendar ensures that you don't miss out...

→ MARCH

08: Oz the Great and Powerful
The Evil Dead creator Sam Raimi takes a trip into more family-friendly territory with this spectacular 3D prequel to *The Wizard of Oz*. Catch it at your local cinema – and watch out for those pesky flying monkeys!
www.disney.co.uk



11: Willow
20th Century Fox conjures up a Blu-ray outing for this cult 1988 fantasy film written by George Lucas and directed by Ron Howard. We can't wait to see how those early CGI effects hold up in hi-def.
www.fox.co.uk

21: Home Building & Renovating Show 2013
Planning to build your own cinema room but lack a few necessary skills? Then pop along to the Birmingham NEC for this four-day dedicated self-build and renovation event to learn the latest tricks of the trade.
www.homebuildingshow.co.uk

22: Jack the Giant Slayer
Originally scheduled for release nine months ago (only to be pushed back for additional post-production work) Bryan Singer's 3D fantasy flick has finally battled its way into your local multiplex. We can only hope that it was actually worth the wait...
www.warnerbros.co.uk

25: Who Framed Roger Rabbit
Robert Zemeckis' inventive comedy about a world where humans live alongside cartoon characters hops onto Blu-ray today – which will give weirdos the perfect opportunity to pause *that* scene to see if Jessica Rabbit is wearing any underwear.
www.disney.co.uk

→ APRIL

01: Archer: Season Three



Another 13 episodes of the gut-bustingly funny and frequently filthy animated sitcom – described as 'James Bond meets *Arrested Development*' by creator Adam Reed – blast their way onto BD and DVD.
www.fox.co.uk

04: HCC #220
Your favourite dedicated home cinema magazine hits the stands today, packed with hardware tests, features, outspoken opinion and in-depth software reviews.
www.homecinemachoice.com

Sonos targets your television

Audio brand brings wireless hi-fi knowhow to the world of soundbars

Wireless audio specialist Sonos is making a move for the valuable real estate under your TV with the global launch of the brand's take on the soundbar concept, the Playbar.

Sonos' Playbar boasts nine individually-amplified speakers – six mid-woofers and three tweeters – although, as usual, the company refuses to be drawn on exact technical specifications, 'We don't talk specifications or Watts. It's a game you can't win. You are either left to lie through your teeth or you end up looking stupid,' explained Senior Engineering Program Manager Hilmar Lehnert to *HCC* when we snaffled a preview of the Playbar in central London. Whatever the spec, having heard it in action there's no denying that the Playbar creates a convincingly wide spatial effect and can go pleasingly loud with both movie and music sources.

The system also adheres to Sonos' reputation for simplicity. 'We only have four connectors,' said Lehnert, 'Power, two Ethernet jacks – which you may or may not use, as we have very good wireless capabilities – and an optical cable to connect to the TV. Our vision of the world is that your TV is the content integrator and then everything goes over optical from there into the Playbar.'

In addition to the free Sonos Controller app, volume can also be adjusted by your TV's remote thanks to an integrated IR receiver that can recognise or learn a handset during setup.

Surround configurations

Most intriguing of all for home cinema fans looking for an unobtrusive 5.1 alternative for a living room or bedroom, the Playbar can also be configured to work as the L/C/R alongside the existing Sonos SUB and a pair of Play:3s or Play:5s for a multichannel setup.



Hilmar Lehnert: 'There's a real need to augment the sound quality of modern TVs and that's a good opportunity for Sonos'

And while the system configuration currently remains locked into the equivalent of a 5.1 array, there is the possibility that this could be expanded in the future. 'It's a huge advantage for us to be internet connected. All the players in the world are always on the same software build and when we push out an update, every single unit on the planet that happens to be switched on will be updated,' revealed Lehnert. 'So while there are no plans at the moment, we could do a 7.1 upgrade [using four Play:3/5s for surround and rear duty] in software. There's nothing in the hardware that would prevent this from happening.'



The Playbar can connect to other Sonos speakers for a 5.1 setup

Crystal wall mount



RGB Communications has announced a deal with German-based INNO International to distribute the latter's luxury in-wall iPad and iPod mounts in the UK. Aimed at those who want to add a little glamour to their home automation control, the mounts utilise high-quality materials including gold leaf and precious stones. Pictured above is an example of the Magic range, with a Swarovski-Crystal finish that apparently 'turns the bezel into a sparkling sea of reflections, which cannot fail to make an impression.'
www.rgbcomms.co.uk

YouView refreshed



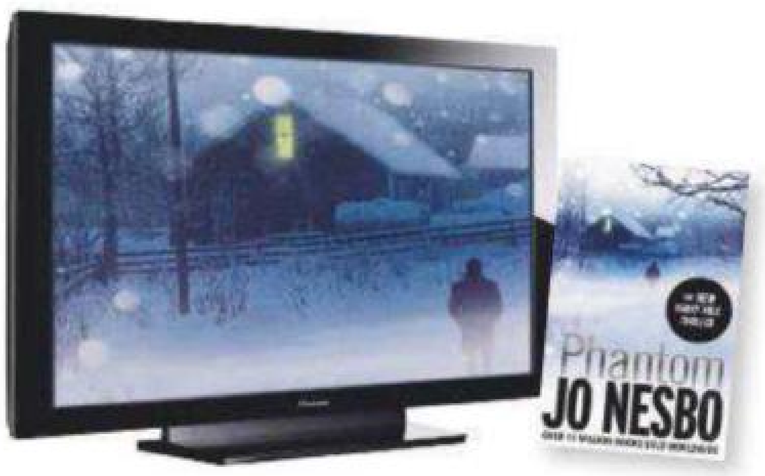
If the black finish of Humax's original DTR-T1000 YouView set-top box wasn't quite flashy enough for you, then we have some good news. The company has just released the DTR-T1010, a new-look version of the box that boasts an eye-catching silver finish on the fascia. Apart from the new lick of paint, though, it's business as usual with all of the Smart features offered by the subscription-free TV service. Even the price is still the same, with the 500GB model retailing for £300 and the 1TB version selling for £330.
www.humaxdigital.com/uk

Minx Air launches



Cambridge Audio has taken the plunge into the world of wireless audio systems with the launch of its Minx Air speakers. Designed to support Apple AirPlay and Bluetooth sources, the range currently consist of two models. The Minx Air 100 delivers 100W of power to two 4in BMR (Balanced Mode Radiator) drivers and will retail for £330, while the Minx Air 200 ups the specifications to 200W power output, a pair of 2.25in BMR drivers and an integrated 6.5in active subwoofer.
www.cambridge-audio.com

This month's top 10 news stories in handy, bite-sized chunks...



News x10

1 Kuro makes a killer cameo

A reference to Pioneer's much-missed Kuro TV technology makes a surprise appearance in the pages of *The Phantom*, Jo Nesbro's latest Nordic noir bestseller. During a tender interlude on p361, protagonist Harry Hole contemplates the incomparable quality of his lover: '*She was like the Pioneer TV they had stopped producing because it was too good, and you could see it was good because the black bit of the picture was so black*'. Who would have guessed that Oslo's leading fictional cop was also a closet AV fanatic?

2 More TV = less babies

Uh-oh! A new study published in the *British Journal of Sports Medicine* claims that young men who watch 20 hours or more TV per week have a sperm count 44 per cent lower than those who watched none or almost none. Almost 190 men between the ages of 18 and 22 took part in the study.

3 Logitech zaps its zappers

Logitech is pulling out of the remote control business after announcing a net loss of £123million for the last three months of 2012. The company is also expected to remove speaker docks and console peripherals from its product line-up before the end of the year.

4 Sony signs with Sky

Sony Pictures has become the latest Hollywood major to sign an exclusivity deal with a UK broadcaster. BSkyB has inked an agreement with the studio that gives its customers exclusive access to its films six months after they hit the cinema.

5 THX launches tune-up app

THX has launched a new iOS app designed to help users set up their AV system. 'THX tune-up' is available through the iTunes store for £1.50 and features custom video patterns and audio tests to help configure your gear – although you will need either Apple TV or Apple's Digital AV Adapter to display the pages on-screen. An Android version is in the works and will launch soon.

6 Sky Go continues to grow

BSkyB is reporting significant growth for its SkyGo and On Demand services during the second half of 2012. The number of Sky Go users rose nearly 50 per cent year-on-year, hitting 3.1 million uniques, while the number of customers using On Demand services through their Sky+HD box increased 70 per cent to 1.7 million. In total, movie downloads across all of Sky's services doubled to a whopping 30 million.

7 Philips severs ties with CE

Having entered into a joint-venture deal early last year with TPV Technology to develop and manufacture Philips-branded TV sets, the Dutch tech giant has now announced that it is selling its Lifestyle Entertainment business (comprising all of its remaining audio, video and multimedia devices) to Funai in Japan for €150milion. The deal followed news that Philips made a fourth-quarter net loss of €358million, compared to a €162million loss in Q4 of the previous year.

8 Virgin sold

Virgin Media has been acquired by US TV and telecoms giant Liberty Global in a deal worth around £15billion. The Virgin Media name will still be used in the UK, although some consolidation is expected within the organisation to cut costs.

9 Loss-making stores to close

HMV is to close 66 of its 220 UK branches as administrator Deloitte reviews the troubled high street retailer's financial position. The closures will result in the loss of around 1,000 jobs. 'This step has been taken in order to enhance the prospects of securing the business' future as an ongoing concern,' droned a Deloitte suit.

10 Blu-ray bestseller

Avatar has hit yet another milestone by becoming the first title to sell more that a million copies on Blu-ray in the UK. However, we have a feeling that this is due, in large part, to the fact that *Avatar* has already had three different Blu-ray releases in the past three years – theatrical, extended and 3D.



Stereogram.com

PREMIERE

What's happening in the world of TV and films...

From Zowie to WoW(ie)

Moon and *Source Code* director Duncan Jones (aka Zowie Bowie) has signed on to helm Legendary Pictures' upcoming $100million film adaptation of the hit online role playing game *World of Warcraft*.

Sin City goes Green



After months of searching, Robert Rodriguez and Frank Miller have finally found their '*Dame to Kill For*'. Eva Green has been cast as titular femme fatale Ava Lord in *Sin City: A Dame to Kill For* – the long-awaited sequel to the 2005 comic book adaptation. The rapidly expanding cast also includes Bruce Willis, Mickey Rourke, Jessica Alba, Rosario Dawson, Josh Brolin, Ray Liotta and Jeremy Piven.

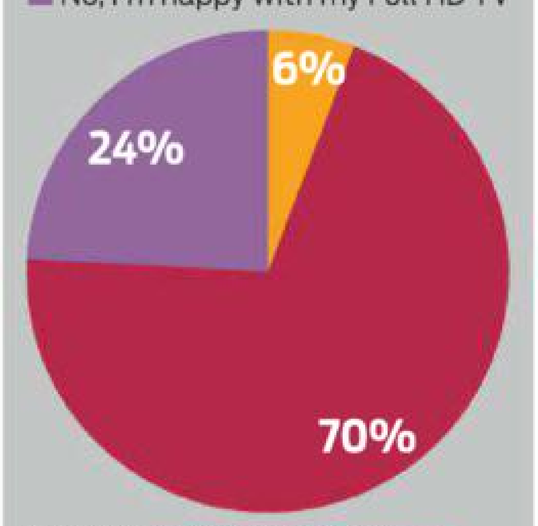
Charlize saddles up

Charlize Theron will star in *A Million Ways to Die*, a *Blazing Saddles*-esque Wild West comedy from Seth MacFarlane that reportedly deals with how easy it was to kick the bucket during the late 1800s.

WE ASKED...

Are you planning to buy an Ultra HD TV?

- Yes, I'll be first in the queue
- Only when there's enough content available
- No, I'm happy with my Full HD TV



Results from www.homecinemachoice.com
Go online for more polling action

Desert island disc

Life of Pi → 20th Century Fox → All-region BD/R2 DVD

Visionary director Ang Lee's bigscreen adaptation of Yann Martel's best-selling novel *Life of Pi* is hoping to impress with its spectacular visuals when it washes up on Blu-ray and DVD in the UK on April 29. We're particularly excited about 20th Century Fox's three-disc BD release, which packs 2D and 3D hi-def platters alongside a DVD and Digital Copy of the film, and offers a trio of behind-the-scenes documentaries (*Remarkable Vision*, *Epic Journey* and *Tiger, Tiger Burning Bright*), four stills galleries, five deleted scenes (in both 2D and 3D), a pair of 3D visual effects progression reels and the trailer.



Always a Pioneer

The new SC-LX86 AV Receiver includes built-in USB-DAC for easy connection to any PC, so you can enjoy high resolution music files directly.

Technical excellence guaranteed

The AIR Studios logo on a Pioneer product is the result of a partnership in design and development since the prototype stage.

www.airstudios.com/technical/pioneer.aspx

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WIN A Stewart Filmscreen Luxus Deluxe Screenwall

Worth £2,400!

We have teamed up with A+K Home Cinema to offer one reader the chance to win a Stewart Filmscreen Luxus Deluxe Screenwall plus your choice of material.

Any home cinema enthusiast knows that when it comes to precision projection screen technology, Stewart Filmscreen is one of the undisputed leaders. As the go-to purveyor of screens for the Academy Awards, Stewart has made an art of designing and manufacturing innovative projection screen products. Now, with A+K Home Cinema, you can win one of its most popular fixed model screens.

Featuring a 3.25in aluminium extrusion frame with bevelled edge, the Luxus combines seamless design with perfect image fidelity. This contemporary screen design is great for use in any home cinema environment and is the ideal solution for dedicated home cinemas or creating media rooms within family rooms, game rooms, or any living space in the home.

The Luxus is available with any of Stewart's award-winning screen materials, allowing for a perfectly tensioned screen surface. For those with 'dedicated' home cinema environments, the Studio Tek 130 G3 is an ideal choice, while the FireHawk G3 is excellent for front projection applications where ambient light may be present, such as multi-functional entertainment rooms. For every application there is an optimal material.

If that isn't enough to convince you, the Luxus is further optimised with Stewart's exclusive VeLux™ appliqué finish. This absorbs over-scan and helps to increase perceived contrast to ensure you're enjoying a truly immersive viewing experience.

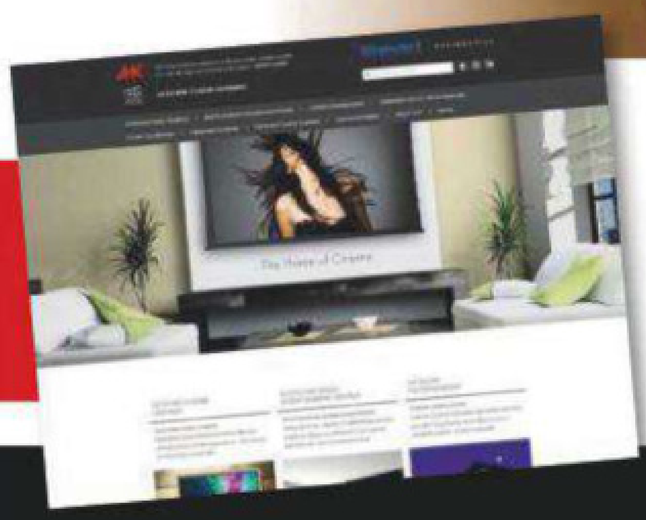
So, if you want a screen that brings innovative design and precision quality, then look no further. Given Stewart's prestige heritage, this is certainly an offer not to be missed!



A+K Stewart FILMSCREEN

New website: www.homecinema.anders-kern.co.uk

A+K Home Cinema (www.homecinema.anders-kern.co.uk) provides home cinema enthusiasts with a central location for Stewart Filmscreen's award-winning projection screens. Recently launched, the website has a wide range of screen solutions for residential applications, including dedicated home cinemas, multi-functional entertainment rooms and outdoor entertainment. The site also features the latest news, updates and insights from Stewart Filmscreen.



Enter online now...

To be in with a chance of winning a Stewart Filmscreen Luxus Deluxe Screenwall simply answer the following question (you'll find the answer on the A+K Home Cinema website):

Q: Other than the Luxus Deluxe Screenwall, name a Stewart screen suitable for a 'Dedicated Home Cinema'

To enter the competition you must go to homecinema.anders-kern.co.uk/HCC-competition. If you have any questions about how to enter or in connection with the competition, please e-mail us at marketing@anders-kern.co.uk with 'HCC Competition' in the subject line.

The closing date for the competition is April 12, 2013. Please read the terms and conditions (below) before entering.



Visit www.homecinema.anders-kern.co.uk for the latest news, products and insights from Stewart Filmscreen

Competition rules

1. The first entry drawn at random will win the prize. **2.** The closing date for entries is April 12, 2013. **3.** Only one entry per person; multiple entries will be discarded. **4.** One winner will receive a Stewart Filmscreen Luxus Deluxe Screen wall (maximum screen size 100in diagonal) with their choice of Stewart front projection screen material. Prize excludes perforated materials. **5.** Employees of MyTimeMedia/Anders+Kern UK Ltd are not eligible to enter this competition. **6.** Please ensure your personal details are correct, as they will be used to contact you if you win. **7.** By supplying your email/address/telephone number, you agree to receive communications from MyTimeMedia/Anders+Kern UK Ltd and other carefully selected third parties. If you do NOT wish to be contacted by MyTimeMedia/Anders+Kern UK Ltd, state so in your competition entry. If you do NOT wish to be contacted by carefully selected third parties, please state so in your competition entry.

PANASONIC PUSHES PLASMA TO THE LIMITS

With its new premium ZT60 TV, Panasonic hopes to finally lay the ghost of Pioneer's Kuro to rest. **Mark Craven** believes they've succeeded

IT SAYS A lot about the reputation of Pioneer's extinct Kuro range of plasma TVs that four-year-old models are still wheeled out for technology demonstrations to this day. Yet that was what faced attendees at Panasonic's 2013 European Convention in early February – a 60in Pioneer KRP-600A resting side-by-side with Panasonic's new ZT60 model.

The purpose of the pairing was straightforward: to show the new screen's ability with black level reproduction, colour fidelity, motion handling and noise suppression against the screen that many regard as the pinnacle of AV performance. And from these initial demos it was hard to disagree with Panasonic's proud claim that its 2013 model goes 'Beyond reference.' Black levels were beautifully dark, shadow detailing astonishing and colour reproduction, particularly reds and golds, supremely vibrant. This is state-of-the-art.



HCC's Steve May auditions Panasonic's new voice recognition technology

The last letter in picture quality?

The ZT60, which will arrive in the UK around May with a £4,000 price tag, brings back the Z range of plasmas last seen with the wireless HD-toting Z1; last year's star, the VT series, is now shunted down to play second fiddle in the Viera family. The most immediate difference between the two is the ZT60's use of what Panasonic has dubbed its Studio Master Panel. This removes the air layer between the front glass and the plasma panel, claiming to reduce the screen's reflectivity and improve light transmission, which, in turn, brings benefits to contrast performance. Other tech trumps include 30,720 steps of gradation, an improved pulse emission speed and something Panasonic calls 1080p Pure Direct, which aims to usher in the full bit depth of Blu-ray discs without compression.

The ZT60 will be a 'limited edition' product, yet the brand is tight-lipped on exactly what that means in quantity terms. Wannabe owners are probably advised to register their interest with their local dealer as soon as possible; on the other hand, 'limited edition' might well be Panasonic's way of saying that it simply doesn't see much demand for a screen with such a premium ticket.

Owners will certainly be rewarded for their largesse, though. Each ZT60 will ship with gold-plated connections, a booklet signed by one of the brand's display engineers and a unique serial number (expect model 001 to surface on eBay...). Even the handset has apparently been buffed up to mirror the

TV's premium ethos, although this wasn't anywhere to be seen.

It's no secret that Panasonic acquired some of Pioneer's Kuro engineers when that brand gave up the TV fight (one that I spoke to said unequivocally that the ZT60 is a better display). Yet I was also informed that the Kuro legacy has hung over Panasonic, undermining what it was trying to achieve. The ZT60 is Panasonic tackling the issue head on.

A TV for every eventuality

With Panasonic continuing to hammer home its new brand identity based around buzzwords such as 'eco', 'simplicity' and 'smart life', and pledging to be the world's 'leading green innovation company' by 2018, you might fear the ageing consumer electronics marque is set to flee the AV world altogether. Yet it still retains a focus here, and on displays in particular. *HCC* was given access to all its 2013 TV models, and it will make for a dizzying choice for consumers. >

SHORT-LIVED SUPERSTAR

Looking back at Pioneer's legendary displays

Pioneer's Kuro plasma TVs are held in such high regard by AV enthusiasts that it's often forgotten that they had such a short life-span. The first Kuro plasmas (Kuro being Japanese for black, as the screens delivered what the brand claimed were the best black levels in the business) were first debuted at the CEATEC show in late 2006, then again at CES in January 2007, before hitting shops that year.

The initial range comprised four models – two Full HD screens (at 60in and 50in sizes) and two XGA resolution offerings (50in and 42in). Pioneer stated that more than 10

years of research had gone into making the PDPs, and this was certainly backed up by performance.

A second wave in 2008 added LCD models and a projector to the Kuro stable, before the KRP monitor screens (with external tuner boxes) arrived touting 9th-gen panels. These proved to be the last Kuros ever sold – despite 10th-generation panels being demonstrated to *HCC*, the global recession and dwindling returns from high-end, high-price flatscreens meant they never saw the light of day. Or should that be the dark of night?

On the plasma side, below the 60in ZT60, sit 65in, 55in and 50in VT series models. These claim Infinite Black Ultra contrast (as opposed to the Ultimate Black of their stablemate), but also carry the same Hexa Processing and 3000Hz Focussed Field Drive. And, unlike the ZT60, they incorporate a built-in camera for smart applications. Buyers further down the range are catered for by 50in and 42in GT models, 55in, 50in and 42in ST models and the entry-level X-Series in 42in and 50in flavours.

And then there's the LED wing. Fabrice Estornel, Senior Manager, TV Group Visual Marketing, says it 'needs to be seen as a maker of top-end LEDs, too' – undoubtedly, considering Samsung is reaping the rewards of such a reputation. The imminent WT60 range should certainly help: this flagship line (in 55in and 47in iterations) marries a thin-bezelled design and 'floating' desktop stand to high-tech innards (including local dimming and 3600Hz back-light scanning) in an exercise of desirability. Below this is a plethora of LED models (the DT60, FT60, ET60, E6, EM6 and XM6) in sizes ranging from 19in to 60in.

Where 3D is offered by an LED set, it will now be of the Passive variety; Active 3D is reserved for the brand's PDPs. 'The majority of end users aren't bothered by the resolution drop,' reveals Estornel.

Telly addicts will be intrigued by the introduction of a new screen size – 39in – in the E6 and EM6 lineups, particularly as 42in fans are still catered for. Meanwhile, those with *bijou* living spaces may be upset to discover that the top four LED ranges begin at 42in and above. Looking for a technologically superior 32incher? Look elsewhere.

In terms of Smart technology in 2013, Panasonic has brought in two key additions to its TV systems. One is so simple but useful that's it a wonder the company hasn't offered it before; the other is the sort of innovation that looks great when demo'd but, personally, I'm not sure will catch on.

The latter is named 'My Home Screen', which enables users to customise the TV's landing page to suit their needs. Live TV is housed in its own window, while beneath and to the side sit icons for widgets and apps, including favourite web pages, a notepad, calendar and the like. Different display options can be tailored to different family members via face recognition; bespoke backgrounds can be uploaded. In use it appears fast and smart, and voice control via the new touchpad handset streamlines usability, yet those with little interest in these sorts of multimedia activities will no doubt head straight to the option to fullscreen what they're watching.

Definitely more eye-catching is Panasonic's implementation of twin HD tuners across many of its sets (and in the case of models with both Freeview and Freesat, four tuners). This enables all manner of multitasking, from split-screen viewing and recording



The new WT60 flagship LED comes in 55in and 47in models

two channels to an external HDD, to browsing EPG listings in a second picture window or streaming content from one tuner to a mobile device or additional TV, while watching something else on the main set. Cool? Certainly.

We want premium playback, too!

As a premium product the ZT60 will surely have its fans, but it's surprising that this attention to detail and 'reference' grade performance doesn't seem to filter into the Blu-ray side of Panasonic's business. A range of new disc-spinners are on the way later this year, but none that at first look seem likely to set the pulses of wealthy AV enthusiasts racing. The chunky DMP-BDT500 of last year retains its place in the current lineup; the new flagship, the DMP-BDT330, is a more slim-line wedge of silver metallic styling. Twin HDMI outputs and 4K upscaling certainly tick tech boxes, and it's packed with Smart features including Miracast second screen streaming, but it's hard to imagine a ZT60 buyer opting for this mass-market companion.

Yet the brand's Chief AV Engineer Tony Itani told *HCC* not to give up on a higher-end model, revealing that a 'premium' player is under consideration for next year. Itani-san also revealed that it's his belief that a disc-based 4K player will definitely surface. Maybe at the same time? He wouldn't say... ■



The DMP-BDT300 offers 4K upscaling and twin HDMI outputs

KJ WEST ONE

THE WORLD'S FINEST HOME CINEMA



Steinway Lyngdorf S-series on permanent demonstration at KJ West One







Stunning true to life sound from a surprisingly compact size

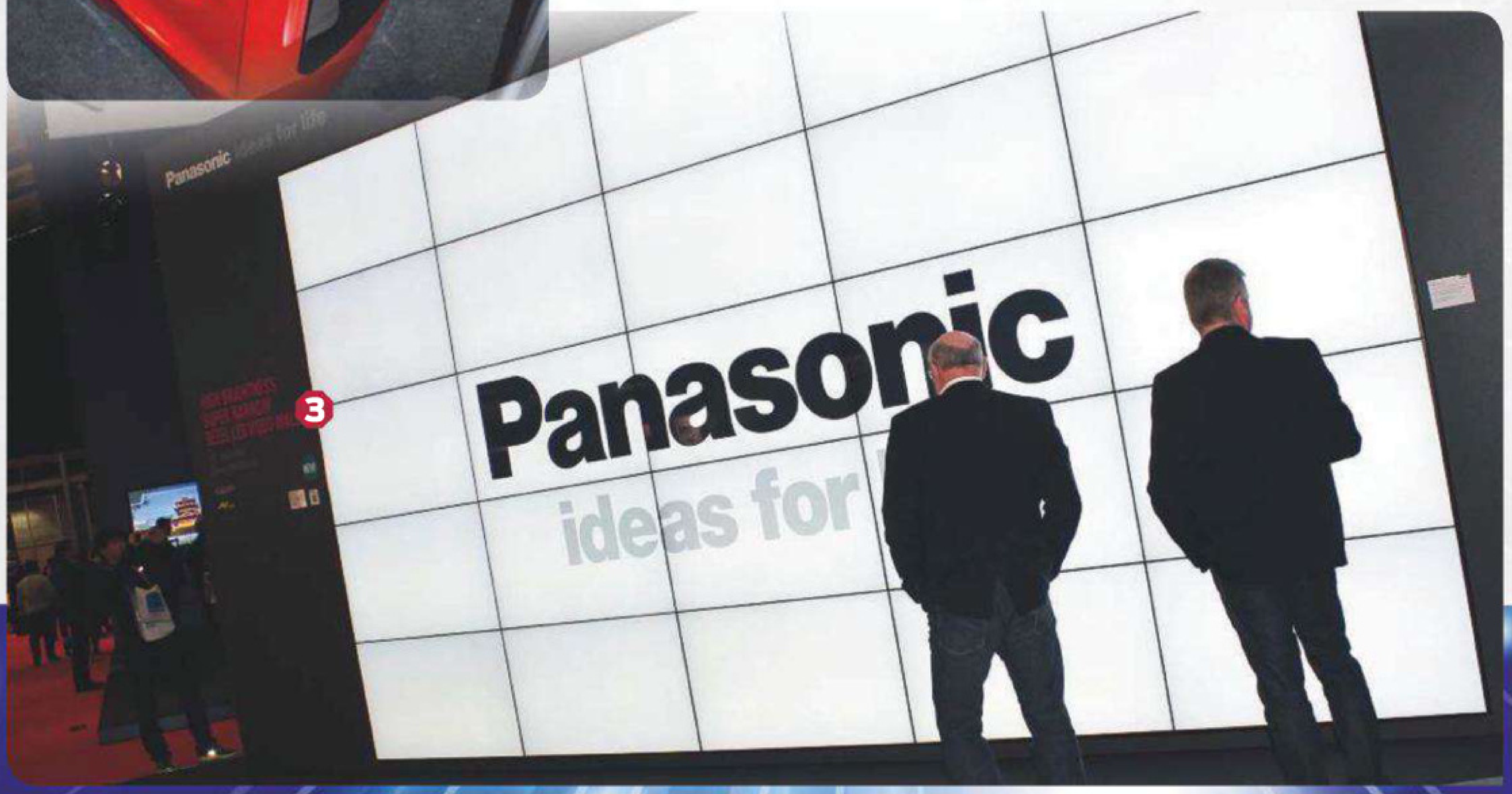
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4



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The curious world of ISE 2013

Integrated Systems Europe is a futuristic mash-up of smarthome technology, home cinema and really, really big screens. **Steve May** takes it all in...

OF ALL THE global tech shows, Integrated Systems Europe, held annually at the RAI exhibition centre in Amsterdam, is the most diverse. It's the nexus between home cinema and smarthome automation and the oversized worlds of digital signage and reality-stretching interactivity. ISE is *Deep Space Nine* to the International CES's *Next Generation*. If you want to see hardware from another planet, it's the place to visit.

Of course not everything launched at ISE is out of this world – there are always some cool real-world gizmos thrown into the mix, too. Read on for our selection of top trending tech from this year's show...

1. Tannoy Kingdom Royal Custom loudspeaker

ISE is no stranger to extreme sound systems, not just in-wall architectural offers intended for the custom install market, but also flagship floorstanders from brands like CAT and JBL. A strong contender for this year's most wanted was a limited-edition iteration of Tannoy's top-liner, the Kingdom Royal. Available to order in any finish, the Custom iteration here looked dashing in red lacquer with a carbon fibre wrap. The asking price? A mere £75,000 per pair! Quite a step up from the regular Royals, which sell for a paltry £48,000. Each 120kg enclosure is built around a 12in Dual Concentric driver, supported by a 3in horn-loaded compression driver. What does it sound like? Who knows, it wasn't being demonstrated. But if you're interested, Tannoy will probably organise a listening session somewhere convenient.

2. CYP AU-A250 DAC & AU-A300 multizone amp

Cutting-edge video distribution and gizmo brand CYP expanded its range of problem-solving gadgetry at ISE with the AU-A250, a nifty £440 DAC offering both HDMI bypass and audio breakout – ideal if you want to integrate and convert both analogue and digital sources into your home cinema system. The DAC upscales 44.1kHz audio to 192kHz with 24-bit depth and has inputs for HDMI, USB, digital audio and phono audio. Also launched at ISE was the AU-A300, a diminutive multizone receiver able to take a multiroom audio feed delivered over Ethernet from a switcher, as well as local inputs from a TV or music source, via HDMI, digital audio and line-level stereo.

3. Panasonic TH-55LFV50 videowall

Panasonic erected the first production sample of its new TH-55LFV50 videowall at ISE. With a bezel of just 5.3mm, the Full HD VF50 LED screens are assembled within a bespoke shock-resistant metal frame. Just 122mm deep, each display claims a brightness of 800cd/m². Image quality was frankly mesmerizing. Why buy one bigscreen TV when you can use twenty?

4. Genelec G Series active monitors and F Series active subwoofers

Genelec may be best known as a maker of posh recording studio speakers, but in its native Finland the brand sells the bulk of its boxes to home users – a statistic it hopes to replicate with the launch of some new compact active monitors and subwoofers. The G One, Two, Three and Four monitors range in size and power from 2 x 12W (bass/treble) to 2 x 90W; they're joined by two active subs, the 40W F One and 150W F Two. Genelec's proprietary Power Management Technology is used to keep things green when they're not used in anger. The monitors can be room-tuned using onboard response controls and boast a Minimum Diffraction Enclosure Directivity Control Waveguide for wider dispersion. Worth considering if you want an active 5.1 speaker system with genuine Pro Studio heritage.

5. Samsung MEC LED Pro displays

Samsung introduced a suite of ultra-thin panels at ISE, topped by a 95in E-LED monster, all incorporating the brand's Smart Signage Platform >

Look ma – no lamp!

Blow up your video with a maintenance-free PJ



Lampless projectors gained traction at this year's show, with Sony, Epson, Mitsubishi and Panasonic all outing hardware. Unlike traditional PJs which use high-pressure mercury or Xenon-based lamps, lampless models run maintenance-free for 20,000 hours or more. There are three technologies responsible: LED, Hybrid and Laser. The former, a low-brightness option favoured by pocket-style Pico models, is usually limited to less than 1,000 lumens. Hybrid LED laser projectors, which employ a blue laser and rotating phosphor wheel to create green (because green lasers cost a fortune), are regarded as a better choice for general AV duties. Super-expensive full-bore laser PJs, able to deliver 50,000-70,000 lumens, are only intended for monster-sized venues.

filmmags.com

ONE CABLE FOR ALL

Cat5e is fast becoming the CI connection of choice

Arguably the most influential new tech at ISE was HDBaseT. The single-wire multifunction distribution system is on the verge of transforming the custom install market and rolling into DIY territory for ordinary mortals. The HDBaseT Alliance demonstrated a prototype television which works with a single Ethernet cable. An HDBaseT set-top box can deliver HDMI video (up to 4K resolution), audio, plus internet and up to 100W of power, over a single Cat5e cable. While regular HDMI cable isn't recommended beyond 20m, HDBaseT can stretch to 100m. Video switchers and audio management systems from CYP, HD Connectivity and WyreStorm were launched at the show supporting the system. Phil Davis, sales and marketing director at CYP, told *HCC* that satellite and aerial installers were rushing to adopt the technology, attracted by its simplicity. 'One of our HDBaseT products allows you to take a Sky box, and run it to three rooms in a house with full IR control, for just £400,' he claimed.

System on Chip (SoC) semiconductor, which software developers can design apps for specifically. The screens feature a dual-core CPU with embedded media player able to run content (WMV, MP4, H.264 etc) direct from a USB, so there's no need to hook up a separate PC or playback device. Attracting most of the nods at the show was the MEC range of low-power LED large-format displays. And if you need a video wall, Samsung offers the UEC line with ultra-thin bezels.

6. JBL Synthesis SDP-45 surround processor

The Harman Luxury Audio Group (LAG) touched down in Amsterdam with a plethora of high-end kit, including Revel, JBL Synthesis and Mark Levinson hardware that would make any home cinema fan drool. Of particular interest was the new JBL Synthesis SDP-45 surround processor, a seven-channel design with copious digital and analogue audio inputs (including balanced stereo) and an 8-in, 2-out HDMI configuration. Lurking beneath the hood are Crystal Semiconductor 192kHz/24-bit DACs and separate power supplies for the analogue and digital sections. Fine-tuning sound is made easier by comprehensive bass management and level and delay adjustments across all channels.

7. Panasonic PT-DZ870 Digital Link projector

Panasonic's new PT-DZ870 Series projectors aren't just light-cannons, they're also blessed with HDBaseT connectivity (see box out, left), for some reason dubbed Digital Link; this means a single Cat5e cable can be used to deliver both HD video and power, which massively simplifies any installation. There are three single-chip DLP models in the range: the 3D-enabled PT-DZ870 is the hero, offering 8,500 lumens and WUXGA resolution; it's joined by the WXGA 8,500 lumens PT-DW830 and the XGA 10,000 lumens PT-DX100. The secret to their brightness is a new 420W dual lamp and drive system. A Lamp Relay mode alternates operation of each lamp to enable 24/7 operation, and if one fails the other automatically jumps in. Another cool trick is a Geometric Adjustment function which allows the projector to cast onto any spherical, cylindrical and other specially-shaped 'screens' without overspill.

> 'ISE 2013 saw the Ultra HD revolution spreading beyond the boundaries of home cinema, with LG leading the charge'

8. Bowers & Wilkins CI 800 speakers

Brit audio brand Bowers & Wilkins established a home cinema as part of its stand within the RAI, complete with its new CI 800 speakers. B&W claims the range is the result of an extensive engineering project, with boffins challenged to replicate the audio quality of its 800 Series Diamond loudspeakers, only with in-wall and in-ceiling designs. The CI 800 lineup comprises three models, with one in-ceiling and two in-wall offerings – the three-way in-wall CWM8.3, the two-way in-wall CWM8.5 and the two-way in-ceiling CCM8.5.

9. Polk Woodbourne wireless audio system and SurroundBar 9000 IHT

Incongruously, American sound expert Polk Audio used ISE to unveil its first entry into the high-end wireless AirPlay speaker arena. The company, which rebranded last year with a return to its Seventies 'heart' logo, took the wraps off a suitably vintage-looking speaker. In addition to AirPlay, it offers Apt-X Bluetooth streaming and features a lush mahogany veneer. The Woodbourne definitely goes loud; there's 180W of amplification onboard (2 x 70W and 2 x 20W), plus USB, digital audio and phono stereo inputs. Behind the grille, and doing all the hard-work, are two 5.25in mid-woofers and two 1in silk dome tweeters. A Summer debut is expected, priced around £750.

Polk was also trumpeting its SurroundBar 9000. The company was an early instigator of soundbars, and has rolled years of development into this new model. Shipping with a wireless subwoofer, it mimics the commands of your TV remote for ease of use, and has an Optimised Center Array (OCA) that tweaks high-frequency dispersion, so that those sitting off-centre enjoy the same detail and balance as those in the central sweet-spot. It packs eight drivers (five 2.5in midrange drivers and three 0.5in silk dome tweeters), all driven at 45W. The partnering subwoofer is an eight-incher with 150W of slam.

10. LG 84in 4K 84WT70 touchscreen

ISE 2013 saw the Ultra HD revolution spreading beyond the boundaries of home cinema and into the world of commercial displays; all key screen brands offered UHD panels. Chris Chinnock, president of analysts Insight Media says that with 4K already established for movie production and distribution, seeing it migrate into other areas of professional display and content creation was inevitable. 'Most Hollywood movies are shot in 4K/5K, so the post-production tools and workflows are there to support it to,' he said.

It was LG which led the Amsterdam 4K charge. Its extraordinary 84WT70 interactive touch display utilises the same 3,840 x 2,160 panel found on the brand's first consumer UHD set, and is intended to be deployed in museums, tourist attractions and malls. And the flatpanel inspiration didn't stop there. LG also teased with the remarkable 47TS50MF transparent display, installed as the door to a futuristic vending machine. The panel supports high-definition animations and touch interaction, and makes ordering beverages a brain-bending experience ■

6



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8



9



World First 84" Ultra HD Touch

Interactive Ultra HD

10



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BLOCKBUSTER MOVIES MADE FOR BLU

From the return of John McClane to another jaunt on the *U.S.S. Enterprise*, **Team HCC** reveals the year's biggest movies that are already on its home cinema shopping list

Jurassic Park 3D

Estimated Blu-ray date: October

Disney may have canned the idea of more *Star Wars* 3D re-releases, but Universal is keen to cash in on the stereoscopic craze, giving Spielberg's 1993 blockbuster a 20th anniversary 3D theatrical outing in April. Love the idea of a T-Rex gnashing at your face? So do we.



Pacific Rim

Estimated Blu-ray date: November

The Blu-ray platter for Guillermo del Toro's *Hellboy 2* (the last film he directed, back in 2008) sports one of the most impressive, immersive, room-rattling DTS-HD MA mixes around, and his forthcoming monster movie, with human-controlled robots doing battle against gigantic sea beasts, definitely seems ripe for similar treatment. It should look fantastic in 3D, too.



Star Trek Into Darkness

Estimated Blu-ray date: September

Even before we found out that this could be J.J. Abrams' last *Star Trek* flick (now that he's accepted the directing duties on the forthcoming *Star Wars: Episode VII*) our excitement levels were high. A big-budget sci-fi movie, arriving in compatible cinemas with a Dolby Atmos soundtrack, bodes well for a stellar home theatre mix. The previous franchise entry also boasted a pristine 1080p transfer and a wealth of extra features. More of that please!

Iron Man 3

Estimated Blu-ray date: August

With *Iron Man 3*, we're intrigued to see how Marvel handles the inevitable comedown from the *Avengers Assemble* ensemble back to standalone character movies (the presence of Shane Black behind the camera could help). More importantly, will Disney manage to conjure up a hi-def release without any of the controversy that surrounded *Avengers...* last year?

A Good Day to Die Hard

Estimated Blu-ray date: June

Unlike the PG-13 rated *Die Hard 4.0*, this latest outing for *HCC*'s favourite cop John McClane was always aimed at adults – a fact that hasn't stopped the UK arm of 20th Century Fox cutting it in order to achieve a 12A certificate. Therefore, the sure-fire 'Extended Harder Cut' BD will be the only way for UK fans to watch McClane's antics in their original bloody, sweary glory.





Oblivion

Estimated Blu-ray date: August

Director Joseph Kosinski caused a stir with his visually and aurally astonishing *Tron* sequel in 2010, and here he returns to the sci-fi genre with Tom Cruise in the lead role. The first film to be shot on Sony's new CineAlta F65 4K camera, *Oblivion* already has Blu-ray demo disc written all over it.



The Great Gatsby 3D

Estimated Blu-ray date: September

An adaptation of F. Scott Fitzgerald's celebrated drama isn't the most obvious candidate for an exciting Blu-ray platter, but helmer Baz Luhrmann is renowned for his lavish-looking movies (*Australia*, *Moulin Rouge!*) and we're betting on his debut 3D flick raising the bar for stereoscopic lushness.



The Lone Ranger

Estimated Blu-ray date: December

Johnny Depp, Jerry Bruckheimer, Gore Verbinski... no, it's not another *Pirates of the Caribbean* movie, but we reckon this long-gestating cinematic outing for the American icon will certainly have a similar feel to Disney's blockbuster franchise – big, loud and action-packed.



Evil Dead

Estimated Blu-ray date: August

Original director Sam Raimi and star Bruce Campbell have already given their blessing to this zombie-horror remake – and the Blu-ray will be indispensable for gore-hounds as it will undoubtedly feature the director's initial cut that failed to impress prudish censors in the US.



Man of Steel

Estimated Blu-ray date: October

Director Zack Snyder is AV royalty, thanks to bombastic Blu-ray releases for the likes of *300* and *Sucker Punch*, complete with his meticulous Maximum Move Mode breakdowns. With Superman's return handled by Snyder's regular studio Warner, we expect more of the same when he lands on Blu.

Look out!

Don't forget to add these BDs to your wishlist

Oz: The Great and the Powerful



Sam Raimi's *Wizard of Oz* prequel looks like being one of the brightest, gaudiest movies ever!

Olympus Has Fallen

Think *Die Hard in The White House* and you'd won't go too far wrong with this action flick from director Antoine '*Training Day*' Fuqua.

Monsters University



Pixar has rarely put a foot wrong when it comes to BD releases, and we don't believe it'll start now

Parker



Jason Statham dons a Stetson to follow in the footsteps of Lee Marvin and Mel Gibson in this fight-filled thriller

After Earth

Can this Will Smith sci-fi flick rescue M Night Shyamalan's floundering career?

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Fast & Furious 6

Estimated Blu-ray date: September



A franchise going nowhere was rescued by 2011's imperious *Fast Five* – if the new sequel can offer the same mix of cars, guns and fights then it will make for a must-own disc.



Jack the Giant Slayer

Estimated Blu-ray date: July

Bryan '*X-Men*' Singer directs this stereoscopic fantasy about a young man with a knack for killing giants. We'd love to see Singer return to his blockbuster form following the disappointments of *Superman Returns* and *Valkyrie*, and this certainly looks like the way to do it.



The Wolverine

Estimated Blu-ray date: November

20th Century Fox messed up Wolverine's first solo outing four years ago. But with the action moved to Japan and *3:10 to Yuma* lensman James Mangold taking the reins, everything now should be in place for the adamantium claw-swinging action that your speakers have been crying out for.

And more

Keep your eyes peeled for these films on BD, too

Pain & Gain

The idea of Michael Bay helming a movie with only an eight-figure budget (and starring Dwayne Johnson) has piqued our interest.

R.I.P.D.

Ryan Reynolds leads this action-packed comic book adaptation about a team of undead police officers. Like your films a bit weird? Then watch this.

Epic 3D

The director behind *Ice Age* and *Robots* wants to dazzle your senses once again with this new 3D CG 'toon.

RED 2

We'll never tire of the sight of Helen Mirren brandishing a big gun. This time the wrinkly former CIA operatives take their 'old school' skills to Europe.

The World's End

The team behind *Shaun of the Dead* and *Hot Fuzz* return with a sci-fi comedy about an apocalyptic pub crawl. Expect a BD release bursting with extras.



Kick-Ass 2

Estimated Blu-ray date: November

Director Matthew Vaughn has jumped ship, but this sequel is gearing up to deliver an even bigger cast (Jim Carrey!) and, as is the way with sequels, even more superhero action. As long as writer Jeff Hadlow can retain the bad-taste, foul-mouthed tone of the original, it should be unmissable.



World War Z

Estimated Blu-ray date: October

With a budget rumoured to be in excess of $125million, we're expecting something epic from a film that finally has the money to show what other zombie adventures can only hint at. The end of the world will have never looked or sounded quite so spectacular in your cinema room ■

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Digging deep for Diamonds



A converted cellar proves the perfect place for some high-end AV antics. **Mark Craven** reports

THIS SUBTERRANEAN CINEMA room, the work of ET Home Cinema from South Yorkshire, doesn't want to hide its light under a bushel – with the owner adamant that Bowers & Wilkins Diamond speakers were to be used for the front soundstage, there was little choice but to let these stunning-looking cabinets steal the show.

Because the owner didn't have a specific end-date in mind, the installation took six months in total from the initial site visits and 3D pre-visualisations to the final room EQ and hardware setup. A representative from Draper screens even went along to talk the owner through various material options, before he plumped for a Linea 2.7m Tab-Tension model.

And, with the room a two-hour drive from ET Home Cinema's Rotherham-based HQ, remote networking was added so any additional maintenance can be carried out immediately.

Chance to shine

With the speaker array (including a B&W DB1 subwoofer and CWM7.3 speakers) occupying the upper echelons of home cinema sound, acoustic treatment was imperative to give it the best chance to shine. Sonapanel HT acoustic panels were therefore installed, and a full sound calibration undertaken.

A THX-level calibration was also carried out to ensure optimum performance from the Panasonic projector, Oppo Blu-ray player and additional sources, including games consoles and Sky+HD. Hardware is housed in a 20u ventilated rack in a secondary room.

A particularly neat touch is reserved for the outer bar/foyer area. Here, a wall-mounted flatscreen TV mirrors whatever content is being displayed in the main cinema room, courtesy of a Wyrestorm HDMI splitter and Cat5 converter.

Land of leather

Seating-wise, there's space for six, each given a luxurious FrontRow leather cinema chair. These are arranged in a two-tier array, ensuring no one is having their view of the



This cinema conversion mixes traditional looks with state-of-the-art AV

> 'The ceiling-mounted fibre optics and smart-controlled strip-lighting give this room a 21st century feel'

movie obscured. In their hazelnut finish these are a great match for the room's traditional décor – look at all that wood! – although the presence of ceiling-mounted fibre optics and smart-controlled strip-lighting both in the room and the bar gives this whole setup a 21st century feel. A quick dabble on the iPad or Control4 panel can usher in any lighting style the owner wants.

In fact, the sheer usability of the install is one of the things that has left a big impression. While the hi-fi and home cinema fanatic is naturally over-the-moon with the AV performance of the finished system, he seems equally thrilled by how it's controlled: 'The Control4 system added the finishing touch, pulling everything together in a user-friendly way. As you enter the room, the wall-mounted six-way switch with its programmed settings is virtually all you need, but the added functions on the iPad give complete control without half-a-dozen remotes!'

Kit checklist

PANASONIC: PT-AE4000 projector
DRAPER: Linea 2.7m Tab-Tension screen
BOWERS & WILKINS: 802 Diamonds; HTM2D centre speaker; CWM7.3 ceiling speakers; DB1 Subwoofer
SKY: Sky+HD
OPPO: 3D Blu-ray player
APPLE: Apple TV media player
MICROSOFT: Xbox 360
SONY: PlayStation 3
WYRESTORM: HDMI-Cat5 converter and splitter
FRONTROW: 6 x home cinema seats
CONTROL4: HC300 processor; SR250 remote control; wall-mounted keypad
SONAPANEL: Acoustic panels



Install info

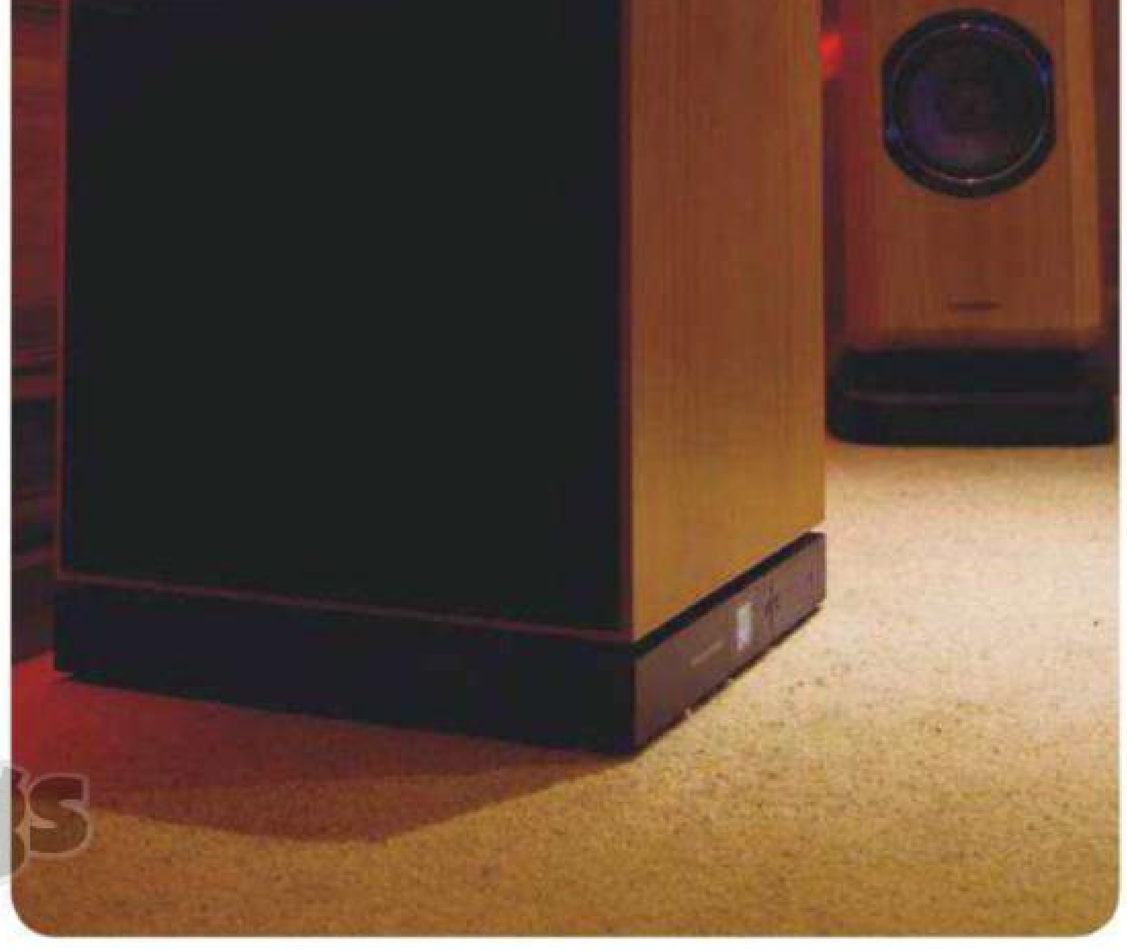
A Lighting the way
Approximately 60m of Starscape RGB LED strip-lighting has been installed in the room, all tweaked by the Control4 system

B Six of the best
FrontRow seating is arranged over two three-seater tiers. The Hazelnut Leather finish matches the room décor

C Sound treatment
With reference-grade speakers in use, treating the room's acoustics with the help of wall-hung panels was vital

D Intermission
Via the use of a Wyrestorm HDMI splitter and Cat5 converter, a flatscreen TV in the outer bar area mirrors the content displayed on the Draper projector screen – so the owner doesn't have to pause his movies while topping up on drinks

E Ready to rumble
The *HCC* Award-winning Bowers & Wilkins DB1 subwoofer handles low-end duties. With its twin 12in drivers and 1000W of amplification, it's an ideal match for the Diamond floorstanders





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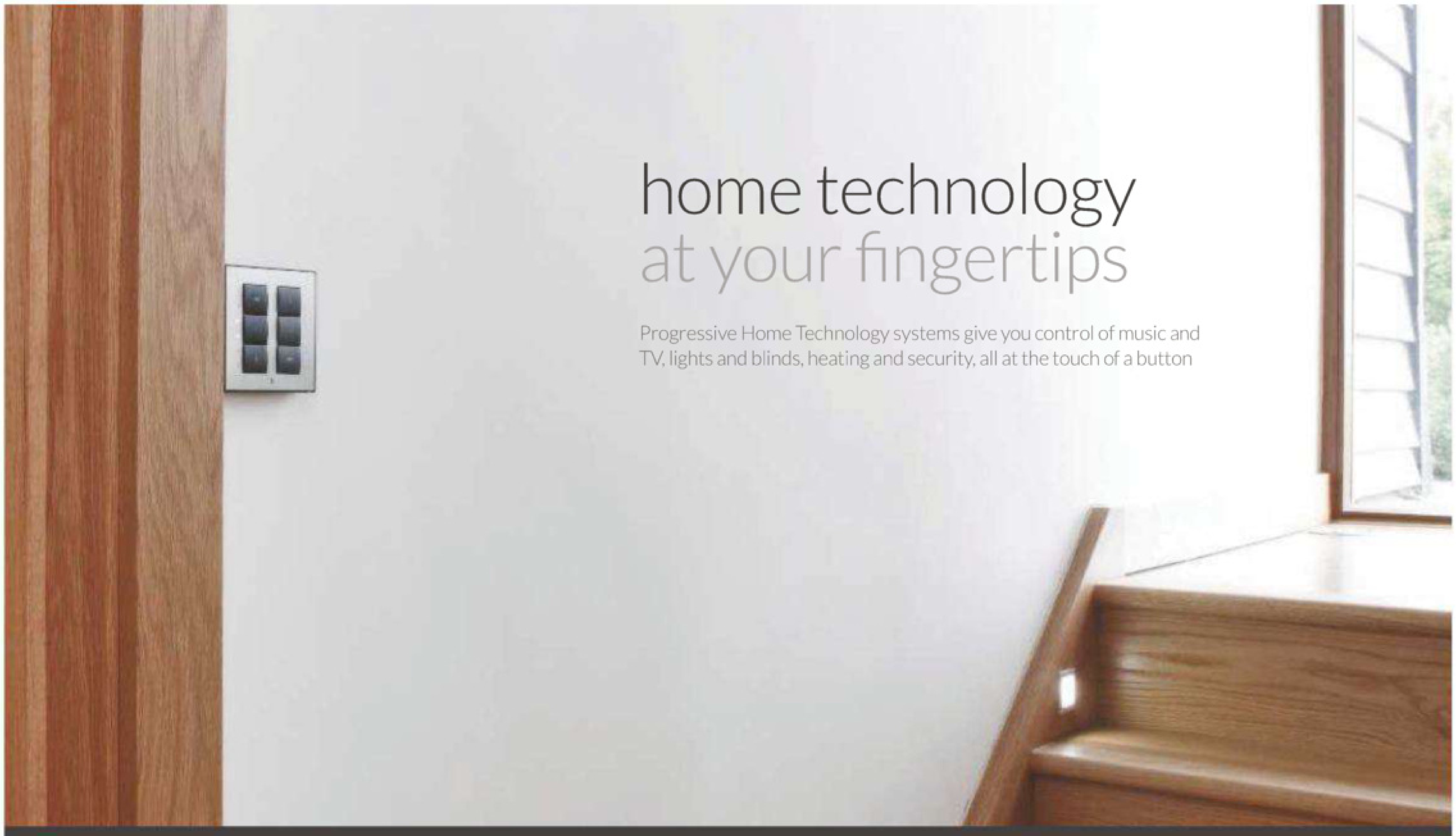
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REVIEWS

→**HARDWARE HIGHLIGHTS** **JVC** Mid-range DLA-X55R projector with 4K e-Shift tech **AUDIO PRO** £600 5.0 speaker package **TOSHIBA** 55in edge LED Passive 3D TV **LG** 50in entry-level plasma at a bargain price **PURE** Avalon 300R PVR marks brand's Freeview HD debut **OPTOMA** Affordable Full HD DLP projector **CAMBRIDGE AUDIO** Seven-channel AV receiver **AND MUCH MORE!**

Dressed to impress



Harman Kardon's AVR 370 looks the part – does its multichannel performance match up? See p52

HCC RATINGS KEY...

Outstanding	★★★★★
Above average	★★★★☆
Acceptable	★★★☆☆
Disappointing	★★☆☆☆
Dire	★☆☆☆☆

Storemaps

40 JVC DLA-X55 → Approx £5,000



The DLA-X55 projector uses JVC's now familiar chassis



JVC shifts Full HD projection forward

John Archer reacquaints himself with JVC's 4K e-shift technology, and welcomes its availability at a new, lower price point

THE ARRIVAL OF any new projector using JVC's consistently outstanding D-ILA technology sets *HCC*'s pulse racing. But it's fair to say we're even more flustered than usual at the delivery of JVC's new DLA-X55 model.

Why? Because it makes the brand's 4K e-shift technology available at a new, lower price point of £5,000 (versus the near £7,000 asking price of last year's cheapest 4k e-shift projector, the DLA-X70). In fact, it even introduces a new iteration of the e-shift technology, cunningly dubbed e-shift 2.

For those unfamiliar with 4K e-shift, it's essentially a clever attempt to give Full HD images the sort of pixel density you would get with a 4K (3,840 x 2,160) image. It does this by using two Full HD imaging devices positioned in sequence, with the second one half a pixel upwards and left of the first. This means images passed through the two imaging devices are made up from double the number of pixels they would be in a normal projector.

As we've said before, the DLA-X55 and other e-shift projectors aren't true 4K machines. They can't take in native 4K sources for starters. What JVC's e-shift technology definitely can do, though, based on past experience, is make images look crisper and more 'dense', avoiding the sensation of visible line structure and slight softness some HD projectors can suffer with when beamed onto large screens.

Improved e-shift

With e-shift 2, new upscaling processing replaces a previous two-band filter with an eight-band iteration able to apply greater correction to more areas of a 2D image. The new upscaling also operates at a 21 x 21 pixel detection level, versus the 6 x 6 level used previously, to produce improved results.

Also new is an area in the DLA-X55's logical and well-presented onscreen menus for tweaking e-shift 2's impact on the picture. Among the options available are themed presets (Film, HD, SD etc), within which you can further choose between Dynamic Contrast, Smoothing and Enhance options.

The effect of the e-shift tech should also be boosted by JVC's usual improvement to the polarising optical wire grid engine so key to D-ILA picture quality. This apparently improves the sense of resolution and contrast (a native – repeat, native – ratio of 50,000:1 is claimed) while also boosting the DLA-X55's brightness in 3D mode by up to 120 per cent.

And that's not the only promised 3D performance boost. The new optical engine combines with new 3D circuitry – including improved proprietary Crosstalk Canceller processing – to deliver what should be clearer, brighter and less crosstalk-y 3D images.

As well as affordable e-shift, the DLA-X55's other claim to fame is its carriage of many of the fine-tuning features – including a full colour management system – previously only available on more expensive JVC models.

Another new feature on the DLA-X55 – for JVC, anyway – is lens memory. This enables people with 21:9 screens to establish five different zoom and focus settings for different video aspect ratios, so that they're delivered optimally to the ultra-wide display.

AV Info

PRODUCT:
D-ILA Active 3D Full HD projector

POSITION:
A fourth addition to JVC's usual three-model lineup, a step up from the entry-level DLA-X35

PEERS:
Sony VPL-VW95ES; Runco LS-1

Both zoom and focus can be controlled from the handset



Brilliant with Bond

Put to work with my just-arrived *Skyfall* Blu-ray, the JVC dazzles from the opening scene. Especially potent is the image's dynamism, even when using one of the relatively 'calm' image presets, such as Film or Cinema. I'm used to seeing JVC's D-ILA projectors excelling with the reproduction of dark scenes and black colours – this has been the foundation of their success since 2007's ground-breaking HD1. But what I'm less accustomed to, especially on the brand's more affordable models, is seeing these stunning black levels partnered by the high levels of brightness and colour vibrancy exhibited here. Numerous Sequences in *Skyfall*, such as those in MI6's underground technology observation 'bunker', become truly mesmerising.

StoreMags



The DLA-X55 features a pair of HDMI inputs – and a component socket for older hardware

The way the DLA-X55 is able to deliver staggering black depth without weakening its new, higher brightness levels pays dividends when it comes to greyscale subtlety and shadow detail. With the Bond platter, this is especially apparent during the extended dusk/night shoot-out at Bond's Skyfall home; you can see details in background walls and the moorland exteriors that get crushed out by projectors that depend on dynamic iris systems to deliver a convincing black level. And not needing to adjust its lamp output has a further benefit – with the DLA-X55 you won't see any of the brightness 'shifting' that troubles many LCD and SXRD rivals.

> 'Motion handling is sublime. There's a system for reducing judder, but I don't think you need it'

I noted earlier the vibrancy of the DLA-X55's colours. Yet neither are they over-cooked. Subtle is the word here, able to delineate without a trace of striping and tiny tonal nuances even during tricky sequences like the red-soaked shots of Skyfall burning against the night sky. The colour range is extreme too, ensuring that after a little tweaking nothing about the colour palette looks forced or unbalanced. JVC's e-shift 2 technology is likely playing a part in this flawless colour handling, given its delivery of more 'pixels' per inch.

There's no doubt that e-shift 2 helps the *Skyfall* Blu-ray appear crisp and detailed. The shots of 007 looking across Whitehall show high levels of detail in skin tones, clothing and background brickwork. And e-shift 2 also delivers on its promise of removing any visible pixel 'grid' structure. This makes movies feel more 'real'. You forget about the technology at play, and focus on the image itself.

By £5,000 PJ standards, motion handling is sublime. The DLA-X55 carries a Clear Motion Drive system for reducing judder, but I don't think you need it. Motion in its native form looks clear and natural.

These superb 2D results were achieved with the X55's lamp set to 'Low', at which level the projector runs impressively quietly.

Stereoscopic star

A run-through of *Dredd 3D* continues the good news as the JVC's 3D performance proves an improvement over last year's models. Crosstalk is now almost non-existent. Just occasionally I spotted a faint 'echo' of dark image elements if they appeared against a very bright backdrop. Colours appear rich and bright in 3D mode too; the Full HD resolution delivered by 3D Blu-rays is excellently reproduced; there's more brightness than previous JVC 3D PJs have delivered; and you also get a lovely, natural sense of 3D depth.

The only issue I had with the DLA-X55's 3D performance – aside from the much louder running noise – was the appearance of some slight double edging and periodic stuttering when showing tracking/panning shots.

The bottom line is that I've fallen in love with the DLA-X55. It delivers unprecedented picture quality for its price point. Grab an audition at once! ■

On the menu

➜ Despite not having an endorsement from the ISF or THX, JVC's DLA-X55 offers copious calibration options to experiment with (including settings for the e-shift feature), and its pull-up menus are more colourful and inviting than some of its rivals

Specifications

3D: Yes. Active shutter
FULL HD: Yes. 1,920 x 1,080 (but has '4K' e-shift solution)
CONNECTIONS: 2 x HDMI; component video input; RS-232 terminal; 12V trigger jack; remote jack; Ethernet; 3D Sync for attaching included transmission 'dongle'
BRIGHTNESS (CLAIMED): 1,200 Lumens
CONTRAST (CLAIMED): 50,000:1
DIMENSIONS: 455(w) x 179(h) x 472(d)mm
WEIGHT: 15.1kg
FEATURES: Colour management system; optical wire grid polarising technology; Clear Motion Drive processing option; 4,000-hour lamp life in normal mode; 2x optical motorized zoom; motorised focus; horizontal and vertical image shifting; 230W lamp; new 4k upscaling processing; 4K e-shift 2 technology

HCC Verdict



JVC DLA-X55
➜ £5,000 Approx ➜ www.jvc.co.uk
➜ Tel: 0845 310 8000
HIGHS: Sensational 2D picture quality; very good 3D images; good setup flexibility
LOWS: Minor motion flaws with 3D; runs a touch noisily with lamp set to normal; out of the box picture presets could be better; a little bulky

Performance ★★★★★
Design ★★★★☆
Features ★★★★½
Overall ★★★★★

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Well, Scandinavian speaker brand Audio Pro reckons you can get by without one. **Danny Phillips** puts the no-sub theory to the test



TO MANY HARDCORE home cinema fans, the thought of a surround sound system without a subwoofer is pure sacrilege, but spare a thought for those poor souls who don't have the space, money or possibly permission for a separate bass box.

If you're one of them, allow me to point you in the direction of Audio Pro's Avanto speaker system, a £600 5.0 setup that could be a godsend if a separate sub is just one box too many. And the lack of a dedicated sub doesn't mean that movie soundtracks are bereft of bass here, either. Each of the floorstanding front speakers comes equipped with an 8in side-firing woofer that aims to provide the necessary bottom-end punch.

Of course, you can add a separate woofer to the setup if these built-in drivers don't quite hit the spot – Audio Pro has a few as part of its Image and Mondial ranges, although there's no dedicated Avanto sub.

The system tested here comprises the FS-20 front floorstanders, the S-20 bookshelf surrounds and the C-20 centre speaker, and all arrive in a single, somewhat unwieldy, box. You certainly get a lot for your money – including a bad back if you're not careful.

Style-conscious

The Avanto's living room-friendly status is also helped by its rather attractive styling. Key to this are the leather-wrapped cabinets, which are nice to the touch – if stroking a speaker could ever be considered normal behaviour. This finish adorns the top and rear panels of the floorstanding cabinets, with

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AV Info

PRODUCT:
5.0 speaker system

POSITION:
Avanto's budget floorstanding array

PEERS:
Tannoy HTS 5.0; Teufel Theater 4; Jamo S426 HCS3



Each FS-20 floorstander features a side-firing 8in bass driver

curved edges that soften the lines beautifully. The gloss-black side panels add a splash of modernity, but they're also available in more old-school black ash or walnut.

All of the speakers come with removable black cloth grilles, held on by fiddly plugs rather than magnets.

On the outer side of both floorstanders, towards the bottom, is a porthole that houses the 8in woofers, again with a removable grille. The FS-20s aren't particularly imposing, which will also ease their integration into your living space. Their heavy, rigid construction makes them feel more expensive than their remarkably low price tag suggests.

The surround speakers and horizontally-aligned centre boast the same fetching leather/gloss black combo and alluring bodywork. They all feature sturdy-looking gold-plated binding posts in a recess on the back below the bass reflex port.

The FS-20 is a three-way design, with a driver array that includes the aforementioned 8in woofer, two 5.25in midrange drivers and a 1in tweeter. Unlike Teufel's Theatre 3, another five-channel system with woofers in the front floorstanders, these speakers don't have their own amplifiers to drive the bass cones, so you're relying on your AV receiver to provide the necessary juice.

The two-way S-20 surrounds offer a smaller 4.5in midbass driver along with the 1in tweeter, while the two-way centre adds a second 4.5in driver, positioned either side of the tweeter.

Note that while Audio Pro's literature is a little sparse (the speakers' dimensions aren't listed in the specs, for one thing) the company does reveal that all the Avanto speakers are rated at four Ohms, so check with your AVR manufacturer before investing.

Setting up the Avanto 5.0 HTS is obviously a lot easier than a regular 5.1 system, given that you don't have to configure a sub. All you do is connect your speaker wires to the binding posts and the speakers separate out low frequencies using their own crossover network.

Back to basics

So here's the £600 question: how does the Avanto fare without a separate subwoofer? Pretty good, as it turns out.

Playing *The Dark Knight Rises* on Blu-ray, through an Onkyo TX-NR818, the Avanto's front floorstanders imbue the fierce action with surprisingly muscular bass. During the movie's epic set pieces, like the collapsing football stadium, there's a convincing sense of depth as the ground implodes.

At no point did I think to myself, 'it could really do with a bit more bass here'. The Avanto is capable of dredging up satisfying low frequencies and bolstering largescale action scenes without fuss.



Build quality, including the speaker binding posts, is good considering the price

If anything, there's perhaps too much bass on offer – when things get hectic, the woofers' overexcitement threatens to swamp the other channels, and without any specific crossover and level controls it's difficult to make them gel. I played around with the settings on my receiver to address the issue, but with only limited success.

This lack of low-end precision is the main problem with the Avanto system's performance. Sudden transients like gunshots are certainly deep and robust, but they lack

> 'These speakers eke out considerable detail, resulting in an open and textured multichannel sound'

the chest-thumping tightness and quick-footed agility you'd get from a dedicated powered subwoofer. I did, of course, try pairing the system with a Velodyne woofer to see if it tightened things up, but still found the FS-20s' performance overbearing.

Perhaps I'm doing Audio Pro a disservice. It was always going to be tough for passive woofers to match the slam and control of an active sub designed specifically to deliver low-frequency effects. The mere fact that it comes anywhere close to sounding like a sub-powered system is impressive in itself.

More than a feeling

And in any case, this system is about so much more than bass. Crucially, it's dynamic and attacking with busy action scenes, firing effects into its spacious soundstage with relish, and has the necessary scale and presence to fill the room. Careful matching of the surrounds and centre ensures no tonal shifts as sounds move between channels, while soundtracks remain composed with the volume up high, side-stepping harshness in the mids and highs.

So when the Avanto array takes on *The Dark Knight Rises*' extraordinary plane crash scene, in which Bane captures Dr Pavel, the result is hugely entertaining. As parts of the aircraft are ripped apart, the explosions have thrilling immediacy, while the score's intense orchestral stabs and pounding kettle drums drive the scene along brilliantly.

Tinkling glass sits on top sweetly, while Bane's voice is as clear and intelligible as it was ever meant to be, even down to the gentle rasp on certain words. In fact the centre channel performance is excellent, handling the movie's variety of voices with pleasing clarity.

Audio Pro's speakers eke out considerable detail, resulting in an open and textured multichannel sound. In the build up to the above scene, the swishing and rustling as a van drives through some long grass is crisp and clear. In fact, throughout the movie the system's assured handling of delicate background ambience and half-heard noises is thoroughly absorbing.

Passive aggressive

So what have we learned here? Well, Audio Pro's package probably isn't a system that'll pique the interest of some readers, given that its built-in passive woofers are no match for a dedicated active sub – sure, they kick out plenty of bass, but their comparative lack of precision and agility means they can sound occasionally unruly.

However, there will be many with less exacting standards who simply want a fun, room-filling sound, and they could find the Avanto 5.0 HTS to be an ideal solution. Good dynamics make for a thrilling listen, while lucid dialogue and clear detail reveal a sonic pedigree above what you might expect at this price. Nor does that tempting £600 ticket come with shoddy design – this system has an air of style about it. Definitely worth an audition ■

Specifications

AVANTO FS-20 L/R
DRIVE UNITS: 2 x 5.25in midrange drivers; 1 x 8in side-firing woofer; 1 x 1in tweeter
ENCLOSURE: Bass reflex
FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 40Hz-22kHz
SENSITIVITY: 89dB
POWER HANDLING: 30-150W
DIMENSIONS: Not specified
WEIGHT: 20.5kg

AVANTO S-20 REARS
DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 4.5in midbass; 1 x 1in tweeter
ENCLOSURE: Bass reflex
FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 75Hz-22kHz
SENSITIVITY: 87dB
POWER HANDLING: 30-100W
DIMENSIONS: Not specified
WEIGHT: 3.2kg

AVANTO C-20 CENTRE
DRIVE UNITS: 2 x 4.5in midbass; 1 x 1in tweeter
ENCLOSURE: Bass reflex
FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 30Hz-22kHz
SENSITIVITY: 87dB
POWER HANDLING: 30-100W
DIMENSIONS: Not specified
WEIGHT: 4.7kg

HCC Verdict



Audio Pro Avanto 5.0 HTS
→ £600 Approx → www.audiopro.com
→ Tel: 01908 282498
HIGHS: Chic, living room-friendly design; surprisingly bassy; clear detail and dialogue; terrific value
LOWS: Bass occasionally overpowering; could be tighter; whatever subwoofer you partner it with won't match cosmetically

Performance ★★★½☆
Design ★★★★☆
Features ★★★★☆
Overall ★★★★☆

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48 TOSHIBA 55WL968 → Approx £1,500



Toshiba's new 55incher sports a sleek, single-layer design



Not quite a chip off the old block

It pains **John Archer** to say it, but Toshiba's latest flagship LED TV doesn't impress as much as its predecessor

HAVING BECOME INCREASINGLY identified with the budget end of the TV market, it was great to see Toshiba flexing its high-end muscles last year when it launched both a 4K-resolution, glasses-free 3DTV and the YL863/WL863 series, the latter of which served up a smart Jacob Jensen design, a slice of Toshiba's powerful CEVO processing power, an impressive edge LED system with local dimming, DLNA network/USB multimedia streaming and online services.

My hopes were understandably high, then, as I took delivery of a successor to the WL863 series in the form of the 55in 55WL968. Yet Toshiba's new kid on the block suggests that the brand has rather lost the courage of its previous high-end convictions.

Impressive styling

First impressions are promising. Toshiba has retained the services of the Jacob Jensen Design studio, resulting in another impressively slender, effortlessly stylish 'single-layer' design. Assembly onto the stand still involves laying the screen flat down on its face, though, which always gives me the heebie-jeebies.

Connectivity is strong too, with four HDMIs joined by a trio USB ports and built-in Wi-Fi – the latter can also handle the Intel WiDi PC screen-sharing system.

It's as I dug deeper into the 55WL968's specifications that alarm bells started to ring. Local dimming of the screen's illumination system has gone the way of the Dodo. This immediately raises concerns that the 55WL968 won't match the black level response witnessed on the WL863.

Also significant is the 55WL968's use of a Passive 3D system rather than the WL863 series' Active one. As well as suggesting that Toshiba no longer sees the Full HD Active 3D format as necessarily the best-quality 3D option (and this is a viewpoint shared by other brands), the shift to Passive 3D reveals that Toshiba is sourcing its core panels for the 55WL968 from a different place – LG Display – than those used in last year's range-toppers.

This isn't necessarily a bad thing; LG has made some decent TVs this year. But added to the removal of local dimming, the shift to Passive 3D panels does smack of Toshiba trying to cut costs, and the pricing lends weight to this theory. This TV retails for about £300 less than the WL863 at launch; a significant saving that puts the 55WL968 more in mid-range than flagship territory.

Saving money is a good thing, right? Well, maybe – but some may rue the 'downspeccing' of the 55WL968, because it also uses a less powerful picture processing engine than its predecessor. In particular, you only get Toshiba's 400AMR (400Hz-like) motion handling system versus the previous pseudo 800Hz system. And, while the TV does offer the brand's Resolution+ upscaling tech, it's now a simple on/off affair, rather than letting you choose different levels of operation.

One setup party trick the 55WL968 retains from the WL863 is automatic colour calibration with Toshiba's optional extra TPA-1 colour meter. There's a small problem with this nifty auto-calibration idea, though; I couldn't find a TPA-1 on sale anywhere while writing this review. This situation isn't improved by the fact that you don't get as much manual control over the TV's colour management as you did on the WL863.

Thankfully, Toshiba's online 'Places' platform is more expansive than before. Useful services comprise BBC iPlayer, YouTube, iConcerts, Acetrax, Blinkbox, Euronews, Daily Motion, Facebook and Twitter. However, while there are a few other C-list gaming and infotainment apps, the overall content level is behind the competition. Not having LoveFilm or Netflix is unfortunate.

The Grey Knight Rises

Setting the 55WL968 to work on *The Dark Knight Rises* (Blu-ray), picture quality isn't as good as I'd hoped for – especially where >

AV Info

PRODUCT:
55in edge LED TV with Smart TV and Passive 3D playback

POSITION:
The 55WL968 is at the top of Toshiba's current Full HD range

PEERS:
Philips 55PFL7007; LG 55LM660T; Samsung UE55ES6900

Another neatly designed zapper from Toshiba



StoreMags.com

contrast is concerned. Dark sequences in the Nolan caper, like the sequence where Batman and Catwoman stalk Bane through the underground network, highlight various shortcomings versus last year's offering. Dark shots appear from behind a gentle veil of grey mist – a classic indication of a panel with a relatively limited native contrast.

Reducing the image's backlight setting improves things, but this makes the picture feel rather flat and leads to large amounts of shadow detail being dialed out. In short, I found myself remembering fondly the brand's local dimming system that delivered such rich black levels.

> 'Pictures on the Toshiba are Batarang-sharp. There are good texture levels and crisp edges to objects'

There's a little light pooling in the TV's corners, too. It was particularly evident during *The Dark Knight Rises*' 21:9-ratio sections, which have black bars above and below them.

I also found you have to use the provided dynamic contrast system to get a remotely enjoyable black level, and stomach the brightness jumps that this entails.



The 55WL968's connections include a trio of USB ports and built-in Wi-Fi

Another big problem for the 55WL968 is 3D, which looks really quite a mess for most of the time. When objects are moving around in a 3D frame they just don't seem right, taking on a flickery, almost see-through quality. It's a bizarre problem, and one that makes 3D very uncomfortable to watch.

Since the Toshiba uses a Passive 3D system, it does at least avoid crosstalk ghosting flaws. Stereoscopic images are bright and colourful, too. Even so, this isn't really a screen for the die-hard 3D enthusiast (and with a measured input lag of just north of 60ms, console frag-merchants may be turned off as well).

There's more to life than black

Anyway, it's time to uncover some strengths of the 55WL968, starting with its colours. These are strong, coping comfortably with the subdued but also diverse and subtly delineated palette of my Batman platter. For instance, tones look as believable under the extremely harsh lighting of Bruce Wayne's tech laboratory as they do in the moodily-lit sequence where Catwoman half-inches the necklace from his safe.

The 55WL968 achieves its colour blend finesse while serving up natural yet dynamic tones. This naturalism slides slightly during dark scenes thanks to the TV's vague grey bent, but it's not a big deal.

Pictures are Batarang-sharp. There are good texture levels and crisp edges to objects. Motion-packed scenes lose a touch of crispness thanks to a bit of motion blur. It's more pronounced than I remember seeing with the WL863. But again, it's seldom seriously distracting, can be improved by the set's Clear Scan motion processing system, and doesn't seem any more aggressive than is fair for a £1,500 55in TV.

Even standard-definition material looks sharp thanks to Resolution+. This does a markedly good job of upscaling pictures so that they look more 'HD' without becoming excessively noisy. Don't use Resolution+ with HD, though ('cos I know you'll be tempted), as it can over-sharpen the image to unpleasant levels.

Considering how slim its frame is, the 55WL968 produces decent audio. Voices sound well-rounded and believable, and although *TDKR*'s action scenes sound a bit thin, they at least avoid sounding harsh.

Flawed flatscreen

While it's not without its good points, Toshiba's 55WL968 has enough flaws to make it feel like a step down from its predecessor. At £1,500 it will appeal to those looking for a 55in TV without having to remortgage their house, but even this price isn't all that great value when you consider what other options are available for similar money ■

On the menu



→ The 55WL968 offers a degree of colour and gamma management and a basic on/off setting for Resolution+. The user interface is intuitive but not the most cutting-edge around and, while the Places portal looks slick, neither Netflix or LoveFilm are currently present

Specifications

3D: Yes. Passive
FULL HD: Yes. 1,920 x 1,080
TUNER: Yes. Freeview HD plus CI slot
CONNECTIONS: 4 x HDMI, 3 x USB; composite video input; stereo audio input; digital audio output; headphone jack; Scart input; Ethernet port; RF input; D-Sub PC input
SOUND: 2 x 15W
BRIGHTNESS (CLAIMED): N/A
CONTRAST RATIO (CLAIMED): N/A
DIMENSIONS (OFF STAND): 1231.3(w) x 33.8(d) x 724.3(h)mm
WEIGHT: 17kg
FEATURES: Built-in Wi-Fi/WiDi; AMR 400 processing; multimedia playback via DLNA or USB; Places online service; auto colour calibration via optional colour meter system; 4 x 3D glasses included; degree of colour and gamma management; built-in test signals for calibration; Resolution+ processing system

HCC Verdict



Toshiba 55WL968
→ £1,500 Approx → www.toshiba.co.uk
→ Tel: 0871 495 8944
HIGHS: Pretty and slim design; good colour handling; decent upscaling
LOWS: Numerous problems handling dark scenes; a bit expensive all things considered; weird 3D pictures

Performance ★★★☆☆
Design ★★★★½
Features ★★★★☆
Overall ★★★½☆

Miniature IR Distribution Amplifier

The new IRBKIT Mini from Keene is a really tiny yet fully featured IR Distribution Amplifier. Compact and light enough to stick on the back of your display it's great for wall mounted Apple TV and similar installations. It also has a special "direct" input that can accept any manufacturers IR Blaster output and re-distribute to more emitters. With a USB power option for added convenience, this is a tiny yet powerful IR package.

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Supplied with a Fascia mount receiver and single emitter this is designed to allow IR control of devices out of sight behind the display or cabinet.

[IRBKITMF] **£65.02** (inc mains USB supply)
[IRBKITMFC] **£47.43** (USB power cable only)

Direct Input Kit

Supplied with a direct input cable (no receiver) and 2 x twin emitter wands this is the one to choose if you want to distribute the IR Blaster output from another device, (eg HDMI extender) to control up to four more devices

[IRBKITMD] **£61.40** (inc mains USB supply)
[IRBKITMDC] **£54.41** (USB power cable only)

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Code PU513L **£253.78**

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Code HDCVC **£79.00**

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Code HDPROAV15	15m	£89.99
Code HDPROAV20	20m	£119.99

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HK's dark star

The AVR 370 is the top-range model in Harman Kardon's stable, promising catwalk looks, slick home networking and nimble multichannel sound. **Adrian Justins** takes it for a spin

THE AVR 370 is as easy on the eye as Jessica Ennis and arguably equally as versatile and muscular. It delivers a standard 5.1 speaker configuration with the option to assign a further two outputs to surround back, front height or second zone duties, and run a second subwoofer. There are also 7.1 pre-outs for enthusiasts with power amps dissatisfied with the claimed 125W-per-channel power output.

With Ultra HD displays seeping onto the market it's reassuring to find 4K output, more for the HDMI passthrough than the built-in scaling. Other standout specs include built-in Wi-Fi and AirPlay audio streaming, DLNA connectivity and a bountiful roster of eight HDMI inputs (one of which is placed on the front) and dual HDMI outputs, the latter good news for those who like to switch viewing from a screen to a projector. Naturally, the list of audio decoding formats includes Dolby TrueHD and DTS-HD Master Audio.

With a flat fascia and curved edges, the AVR is typical Harman Kardon. Overall it's attractive, but the minimalist approach makes it almost impossible to read the labels that accompany the limited selection of Hobbit-sized buttons along the unit's mid-rift.



Harman Kardon has imbued its top-flight receiver with sleek style

The AVR-370 comes with both main and second zone remotes



AV Info

PRODUCT:
7.2-channel AVR

POSITION:
Top of Harman Kardon's lineup of eight home cinema receivers

PEERS:
Denon AVR-2313, Yamaha RX-A820, Pioneer SC-2022

A camouflaged cover hides the front HDMI, a USB and headphone socket.

The saucer-sized volume dial has a rim that glows like a giant white Polo mint but can't be tempered. The large LED display window can at least be adjusted with four settings, including off. Another distraction is an aural one, with a high-pitched buzz emanating from the amp's innards when it's powered up. You won't notice it during noisy soundtracks but it might spoil quieter ones, especially if the unit is housed in an echoey cabinet.

The AVR 370 has power-house dimensions that far exceed the space required to house its all-digital amplifier. This at least makes it much lighter than it looks. And, although the fascia is durable as well as pretty, the body metal is flimsy and the speaker terminals are a tad rubbery.

Naturally, there's a free app available to download for iOS and Android devices. As Pioneer has shown with its superb iControlAV2012, apps can be much more efficient and certainly a lot more fun than physical handsets. Sadly, the HK app is no match for Pioneer's, offering nothing more than a basic replication of the buttons on the physical remote with no sliding, swiping or imaginative graphics. In fact, the HK app (on an iOS 6 iPhone) was buggy when tested, with one or two commands not executing properly.

Just as well then that the physical remote control is a much better experience. Despite its whopping 25cm length, the handset rests nicely in the hand. Lettering on the source buttons is more cramped than Spielberg's awards cabinet but overall the remote is easy to get to grips with, thanks to the spacious layout of back-lit, rubberised buttons. Also, it integrates well (with one or two exceptions) with the operating system, which itself is a very pleasant high-res interface, logically laid out and easy to navigate. Harman Kardon supplies a second, smaller remote for the second zone.

The easiest, recommended way to set up is using the supplied EzSet microphone, which >

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Harman Kardon has joined the HDMI arms race, offering eight inputs and two outputs on the AVR 370

plugs into the front headphone socket. Select and run the EzSetEQ, sit back in silence and let the AVR pump white noise through your speakers to determine the configuration of your room. In my case the settings were inaccurate, with manual correction needed to the distances of the speakers, which were wrong by between 50cm and 70cm, and the output of my subwoofer.

Next, each source needs setting up and is best done with a live feed, which shows you the incoming audio and/or video format. You select the input socket and set parameters such as the output video resolution and video

> 'Harman Kardon's AVR 370 laps up *Super 8*'s mixture of visceral muscularity and discrete effects'

mode (there are three – nature, movie and sport). The latter can also be tweaked from a button on the remote, as can audio effects and surround modes. Whilst it's possible to select HDMI bypass, it's annoying that the AVR won't passthrough HDMI signals when in standby. Once you're up and running the AVR will select the best surround mode automatically, which means direct mode in the case of multichannel surround sound Blu-rays.

Networking is not quite the strong point I was expecting, with folder navigation and surround mode setting impossible without onscreen assistance (the default surround mode is always HK's Logic 7 but DTS Neo:6 and DPL-II Music are available). Worse, the AVR 370 would only playback WMA, MP3 and lower bit-rate FLAC files, eschewing all images and videos, regardless of location (on a USB stick and a DLNA server). At least AirPlay from an iPhone worked effortlessly.

Super *Super 8*

Setup hurdles aside, when it comes to the home cinema crunch, the AVR 370 certainly delivers the goods. *Super 8*'s Dolby TrueHD soundtrack is a terrific mixture of visceral muscularity and discrete effects that the Harman Kardon 370 laps up. From Joe's creaking footsteps as he silently approaches his sobbing father to the sound of his dad wiping his chin in the bar, there's a clarity and subtlety to the proceedings that draws you in. The pre-crash scene at the railroad is a delight, with paper rustling across the soundstage, a fly that irritates Charles in the front left (for no reason other than to show off the audio mix) and Alice's exquisitely delivered pleading tightly-focused on the centre channel. As the train crashes the cacophony of explosions and screams is deftly delivered across the system, underpinned by a taut LFE.

The DTS-HD Master Audio mix on *Jaws* is equally engaging. From the eerie creaking of the boat's damaged timbers to John Williams' hallmark two-note phrase, the AVR 370 easily ratchets up the tension.

The HK feels right at home with music, too. The default Logic 7 processing gives breadth and presence to stereo CDs, and from orchestrated tracks to rock and electronica it exhibits a fine sense of agility and never feels like it's straining its power reserves.

The HK AVR 370's weaknesses are its unimpressive networking skills, quirky operating system and rubbish app. Yet these are easily overlooked given its decent remote, slick looks and multichannel surround sound performance. Worth investigating ■

On the menu



→ The AVR 370's menus earn brownie points for being hi-res and sensibly organised, and work well in tandem with the over-sized handset. However, the file-streaming portal could be more intuitive and the smartphone/tablet app is short on glamour

Specifications

DOLBY TRUEHD: Yes. And Dolby Pro-Logic IIz
DTS-HD MASTER AUDIO: Yes
THX: No
MULTICHANNEL INPUT: No
MULTICHANNEL OUTPUT (CLAIMED): 7 x 125W
MULTIROOM: Yes. One extra audio zone
AV INPUTS: Yes. 2 x composite; 3 x digital audio (2 x optical and 1 x coaxial)
HDMI: Yes. 8 x inputs, 2 x outputs, v1.4
COMPONENT VIDEO: Yes. 2 x inputs
VIDEO UPSCALING: Yes. To 4K
DIMENSIONS: 440(w) x 435(d) x 165(h)mm
WEIGHT: 8kg
ALSO FEATURING: 7-channel stereo or 5-channel stereo modes; Harman International Logic 7 (Movie, Music and Game); Harman virtual speaker; HK app (iOS and Android); DLNA networking; AirPlay; Harman Music Manager; built-in Wi-Fi; internet radio; MP3, WAV and FLAC (up to 16-bit) playback over USB and network; EzSetEQ; 2 x USB sockets; headphone jack; Ethernet; IR in x 2; IR trigger x 2; FM/AM aerial socket; 7.2-channel pre-out; RS232 connector; iPod/iPhone USB integration

HCC Verdict



Harman Kardon AVR 370
→ £850 Approx → www.harmankardon.co.uk
→ Tel: 01707 278 113
HIGHS: Taut, powerful multichannel sound; attractive design; decent remote control
LOWS: Buzzing noise on our sample; boring control app; dull networking experience; distracting LED glow; inaccurate EzSetEQ

Performance ★★★★☆
Design ★★★★☆
Features ★★★★☆
Overall ★★★★☆

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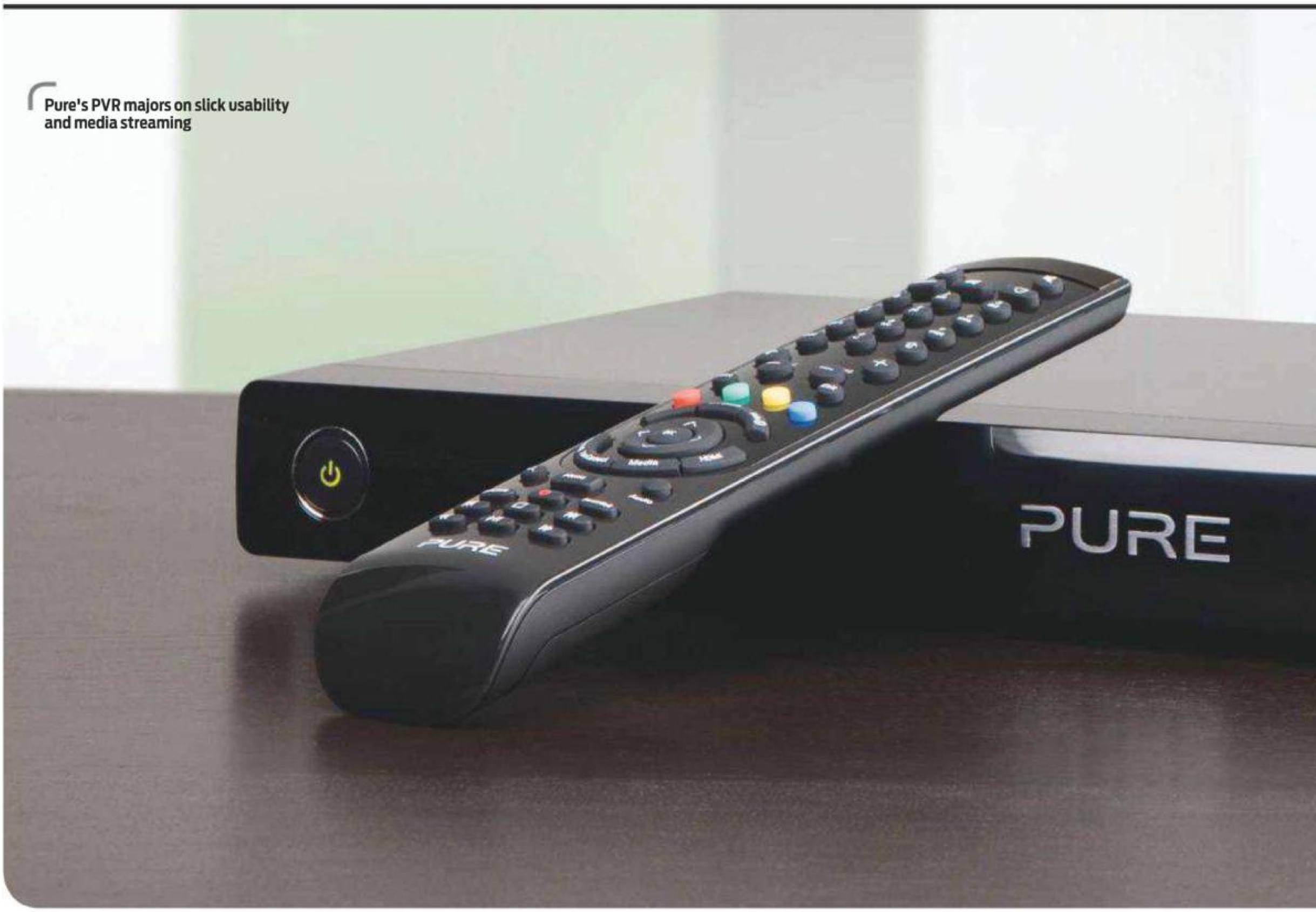
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Pure's PVR majors on slick usability and media streaming

Welcome to the rock 'n' roll recorder

Pure's PVR debutant is glossier than a glazed doughnut, says **Steve May**. But is there more to this set-top box than just fancy graphics?

CAN PURE SHAKE up the Freeview HD digital TV recorder business in the same way it rocked the sedate world of digital radios? On the evidence of this highly-polished punt, it's in with a good shout. The Avalon 300R Connect offers a surprisingly fresh user experience, combing copious connectivity with forward-thinking functionality.

There are two versions of the 300R Connect available. A 500GB model, which retails for £300, and the £350 1TB beast featured here. The former typically records around 300 hours of standard-definition material or 125 hours of HD. The latter has the capacity for over 600 hours of SD, or 250 hours of hi-def.

Well connected

The box itself is anonymously slim, standing a mere 44mm tall. There's no on-body display, just a honking big Pure logo (perhaps too large if truth be told) placed dead centre. This is flanked by an illuminated green/red power button and a USB port, hidden behind a cap.

The rear of the recorder offers an Ethernet connection and secondary USB, plus analogue stereo phonos, optical digital and coaxial digital audio outputs plus RF aerial loop-through. Strikingly, it also features an integrated four-input HDMI switch. That pretty much takes care of any HD kit congestion you may be suffering in one fell swoop. No wired network connection

Stereonet.com



AV Info

PRODUCT:
Feature-rich Freeview HD+ PVR

POSITION:
First entry into the TV recorder market

PEERS:
Humax YouView DTR-T1000; Panasonic DMR-HW220; Echostar HDT-610R

available in your viewing room? No worries, Wi-Fi is also onboard.

The Avalon's initial setup procedure is slick and intuitive. The recorder races through available channels and sorts them accordingly; network configuration is similarly painless. Beware the eco setting in the Power Management menus, though, which disables the aerial loop-through when the deck goes into Standby. This is on by default, and while it may save you miniscule amounts of electricity over the course of a year, it'll frustrate the heck out of family members unable to fathom why the telly loses its channels when the PVR goes to sleep.

Fancy graphics

The Avalon's most obvious selling point is its HD user interface. This front-end has been developed by Pure parent Imagination Technologies' PowerVR graphics division, and it's an honest to goodness head-turner. Settings, recordings, on-demand and HDMI input selection are all accessed via 3D tiles that animate as you browse. Channel changes are a symphony of fades and dissolves, while programme info cartwheels back and forth. It's all quite dizzying. 'If you look inside the box you'll find an Intel CE4150 chipset; it's this that delivers the nice, cool UI stuff,' says Pure's director of marketing, Colin Crawford.

Rather ingeniously, the PVR also integrates with Pure Connect, the brand's audio entertainment and subscription platform. Grab an account and you can log in for access to internet radio services, podcasts and the brand's Pure Music subscription and download services. The implementation is currently in beta – and it shows. Operationally, I found it a little clunky and slow, but the promise is definitely there. This is clearly a work in progress, but worth keeping any eye on.

The Avalon 300R Connect is also DLNA compliant and knows how to behave when on a local network or confronted with local storage. The PVR sniffed out UPnP media servers on my LAN and played ball with a wide assortment of codecs and containers. Video support covers MKV, AVI, MOV and assorted MPEG flavours, while audio compatibility extends to MP3, FLAC, WMA, WAV, AAC and M4a. Yet, oddly, the Avalon doesn't have the good grace to present album art when it's available, which seems a missed opportunity given just how graphical an experience the recorder offers. Instead, you simply get a black screen with track names displayed. The deck also presents JPEGs, but there currently is no provision to import these, or MP3s for that matter, onto the HDD for a more jukebox-like experience.

Still catching-up

One area where it could be argued that the Avalon is underserved is on-demand and catch-up. Currently there are only BBC iPlayer and YouTube clients available, although these >

Unusually, the Avalon offers a four-port HDMI switch





Unfortunately, you can't use the USB input to load files onto the HDD

are the latest HTML5-based iterations of each. Both prove fast to load, and look sharper than Beckham in his Sunday best. However, compared to what's on offer from YouView, this paucity of IPTV makes the 300R look a tad undernourished. The company says that it is planning to add more services going forward, so the situation is best thought of as fluid. A wider range of mainstream catch-up Players and Netflix would be a welcome upgrade.

General usability is high. Once in the library you can edit your recordings, trimming excess fluff from the start or finish. Edited versions are then re-saved to the hard drive. While this

> 'Settings, recordings and on-demand are all accessed via dizzying 3D tiles that animate as you browse'

may ultimately seem a waste of time on a PVR, Pure is planning to offer an export option for SD content should you want to shift material off the box and onto a USB stick for playback elsewhere. The titles of recordings can also be changed.

Recorded picture quality is excellent. HD looks extremely sharp, with fine detail and texture aplenty. The 300R upscales SD content to 1080p, and doesn't seemingly impart any artefacts of its own.

One key aspect of any Freeview PVR that can easily be overlooked is its ability to deliver genuine 5.1 surround. Thanks to a quirk in the Freeview broadcast standard, PVR makers need to crowbar some middleware into their boxes in order to deliver multichannel PCM over HDMI and digital audio. A surprisingly high number of boxes have failed in this basic requirement over the years. But the Avalon doesn't miss a beat. It outputs crisp immersive 5.1 over HDMI (when the broadcaster provides it, of course), making it absolutely appropriate for home theatre usage. A timeshifted HD transmission of *Alien Vs Predator: Requiem* was delivered in popcorn-pleasing 5.1 clarity.

The deck's onscreen graphical flourishes are many and varied. I particularly like how once you select a channel, the info slate fades in and out, revealing how far into the programme you currently are, if it has a multichannel soundtrack, and so on. You can also superimpose a channel list for quick navigation. This graphical prowess makes the 300R a very intuitive recorder for casual users. Recordings can be pre-planned via the programme guide, or captured live using the One Touch Record facility. While hitting the Rec button on the remote is the simplest option, you can also elect to manually set the time.

The EPG itself is standard issue. An eight-day affair, it offers a live TV window when browsing but only six channels are displayed on a page; navigating these is a bit tortuous. If you can't find what you want there's a Search facility. Search terms can consist of a programme name or genre. If you find what you want, you can record direct from this search screen.

A cut above

The Avalon 300R Connect is arguably the most exciting Freeview HD PVR I've seen since the launch of YouView. Rather than jump the retrospective 7-day EPG catch-up bandwagon, the brand has brought something altogether different to the table, and I approve. While YouView cocks a snoot at the wider multimedia world, the 300R Connect positively embraces it, with excellent file playback, plus access to 'net radio and assorted audio services. The user experience is also a cut above, thanks to those delicious PowerVR-powered graphics. Ultimately, this is a TV recorder with a rock 'n' roll heart. And, pop pickers, I rate it a hit ■

On the menu



→ Pure's user interface is probably the best in the business. Powered by an Intel chipset, it makes navigating the PVR's settings, features and contents a lavish, streamlined experience

Specifications

HDD: Yes. 1TB
TUNER: Yes. 2 x Freeview HD
UPSCALING: Yes. 1080p
CONNECTIONS: 1 x HDMI output; 4 x HDMI inputs; 2 x USB; 2 x digital audio (one optical, one coaxial); stereo phonos; Ethernet
DIMENSIONS: 430(w) x 44(h) x 245(d)mm
WEIGHT: 2.9kg
FEATURES: Integrated Wi-Fi; DLNA compatible, with wide format support; 8-day EPG; Series Linking; Recommendation Engine; BBC iPlayer; YouTube; Pure Connect; Picture-in Picture

HCC Verdict



Pure Avalon 300R Connect 1TB
→ £350 Approx → www.pure.com
→ Tel: 0845 1489 001
HIGHS: Beautiful graphical interface; excellent sound and vision performance; solid file support; HDMI input-switching
LOWS: Limited on-demand/catch-up services; Pure Connect integration needs some fettling

Performance ★★★★½
Design ★★★★☆
Features ★★★★½
Overall ★★★★½

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Insert your own Flash Gordon pun here...

Hi-fi fans routinely praise the virtue of valve-based amps and thanks to Ming Da's five-channel MC-5S, film fanatics can now see what all the fuss is about. **Richard Stevenson** reports



The MC-5S brings the warm heritage of valve amps to the home cinema world

AV Info

PRODUCT:
Five-channel power amplifier

POSITION:
The only multichannel product in Ming Da's valve amp range

PEERS:
Not sure it has any....

YES, YOU'RE RIGHT. This really is a five-channel valve-based power amp. Ming Da, one of China's premium hi-fi brands with over 20 years of audiophilia under its belt, has entered territory that most valve amp manufacturers have feared to tread: a multichannel design. You see, while glowing tubes still have a fervent following in the sort of audiophile circles where strokeable beards and thick woolly jumpers have become a standard uniform, they have never been a home cinema thing. The main reason is that in the race for more speaker-driving power for home cinema, tube amps just don't pack enough punch. Until now.

The Ming Da MC-5S boasts a very healthy, in valve amp terms at least, 70W-per-channel across all five channels. Okay, I grant you that budget AVRs at a tenth of the MC-5S's asking price offer about the same, but that's not the point. What the Ming Da offers is sumptuous valve sound with music via its dedicated two-channel input, and the ability to expand that sound to five channels for multichannel music or movies. One of the strong points of valves is richness and detailing through the vocal range, arguably making them ideal for home cinema and, particularly, the dialogue channel. Moreover, 70W is good to produce over 100dB in-room SPLs with most modern speakers. See, a massive five-channel power amplifier based on valves is not so silly. Well, okay, it's a bit silly, but we like it.



Making the case for valves

As £4,000 could buy you an awful lot of Class A/B transistor power and a whole lot more Class D grunt, then why use valves? Well, technically, there is no outstanding reason because for the most part valves offer lower power and have more distortion than solid-state transistors. They also tend to impart more character into what is being reproduced, which can be good or bad depending on your own preferences. That character or tone has been a fundamental part of the music recording business for years and many famed artists will still only use valve-based guitar amps to get the sound they want. In addition, valve circuits are inherently a whole lot simpler than transistor circuits, meaning far fewer potentially sound-degrading components in the food-chain. Valves also work at much higher voltages than typical transistor amps, so their dynamic potential is greater without the need for capacitors the size of dustbins in the circuit. This is why tube amps often sound a lot more punchy and powerful than their power figures would have you believe.

Of, course there is the unique cosmetics of the Ming Da MC-5S, too. While most receivers and even AV power amps are designed to be hidden away or racked and stacked on a shelf, the Ming Da is very much a centrepiece. For starters, it's huge. The main case sits some 620mm wide, plus some space for the toggle switches. Then there is a large outboard power supply the size of a shoebox and so heavy it has its own gravitational field. Umbilical cables link the two, connecting to the side of the main amp. Once you've accounted for the space you need to access the toggle switches on both sides, the whole MC-5S ensemble requires about an acre. This is an amplifier with real presence, and as such will definitely appeal to those dismayed by the perpetual miniaturization of AV.

Despite the Ming Da's size, the design is clean and minimalist, with a rack of 20 valves (10 large, 10 small) that glow a warm orange when powered up. The internals are hand-built and hard-wired, and the sturdy packaging comes complete with white gloves to aid installation.

VU power meters on the front of the MC-5S are conventionally lit and in two-channel mode just the two meters to the right are illuminated. Connections are straightforward phono inputs for all five channels plus additional stereo phono inputs. The switches have the sort of look and feel of something you might find on the dashboard of a WWII Spitfire. Very retro.


Give the valves time to warm for a peak performance

Powering up requires switching on the power supply, switching the main amp on and then a few seconds later switching from standby by to 'on' mode. Within a minute you are bathed in the warm glow of audio heritage. Valves do take a little while to stabilise, so while they will work straight away they won't be at peak performance for twenty minutes or so. And they do get quite toasty, too. With all channels driven on a regular basis you can probably consider turning your central heating down a notch.

Aesthetically, operationally and sonically there is something very unique and organic about the Ming Da MC-5S. The powering up routine is something to be savoured, the gentle glow of the valves is a delight in a darkened room and even the very faint ringing of the tubes has an air of purpose and history. In my extremely complex AV system, earth loops and interference proved to be a bit of a challenge for the Ming Da, requiring a strip back to basics to eliminate clicks, pops and hums. Ironically, the amp was at its absolute best driven directly from the outputs of a cutting-edge Oppo BDP-105EU BD player, eliminating a processor or pre-amp altogether.

Extra-terrestrial amplification

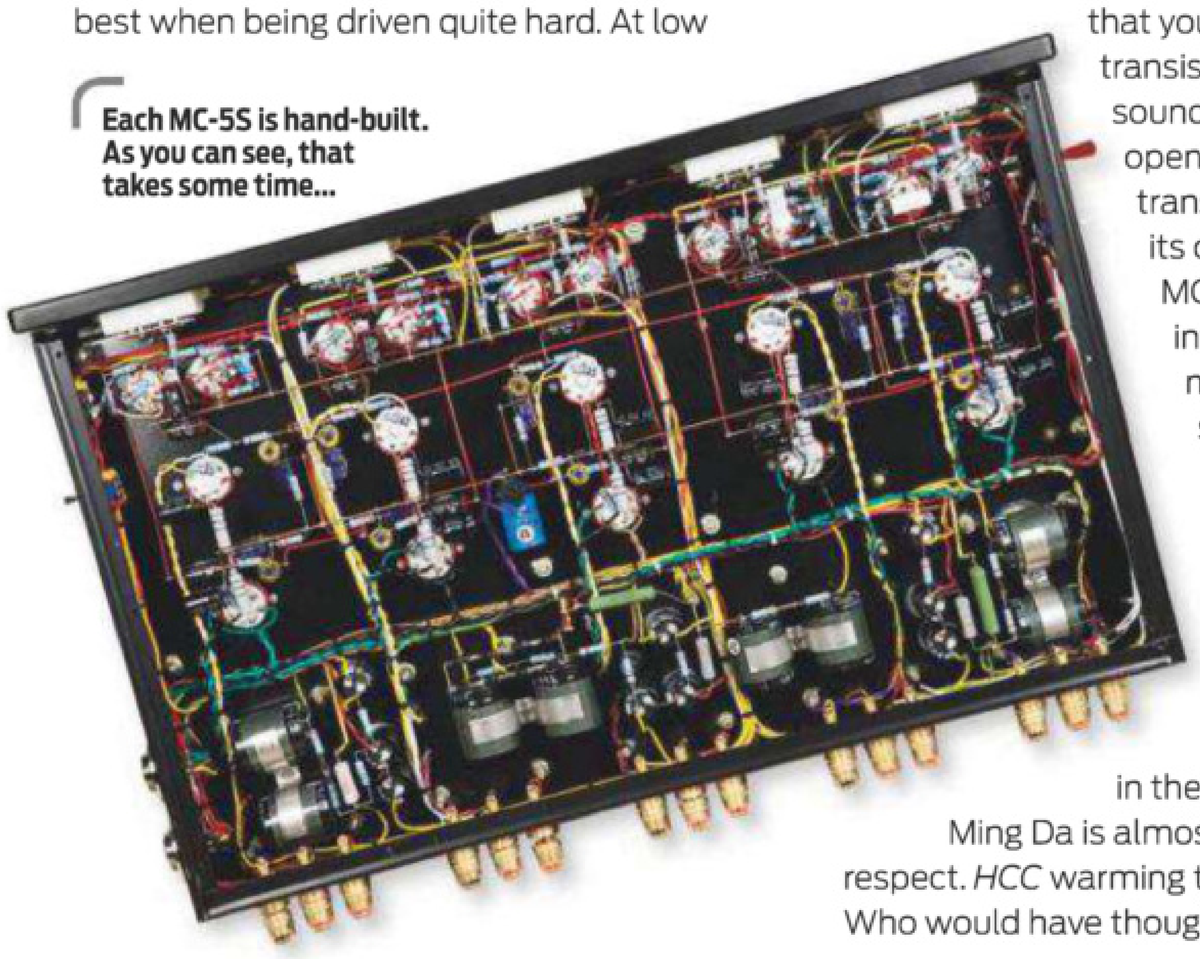
From the opening credits of *Prometheus* the Ming Da is not what you might imagine. Slow, ponderous, murky and old-sounding, it isn't. The sound is rich and alive, with superb vocal detailing that by comparison makes most transistor amps sound a bit cool and stark. Big crescendo pieces scale beautifully and, with my efficient floorstanders, the MC-5S drives the volume to neighbour-unfriendly levels with ease. With the VU meters peaking just past the 12 o-clock position, the valves deliver a really cohesive and detailed soundstage with an enviable smoothness and balance.

Interestingly, the MC-5S is actually at its best when being driven quite hard. At low volumes its richness and subtleties are a little bit of an undoing, sounding rather too laid-back for its own good. But give it a small handful of volume (or more accurately a few digital clicks of the Oppo's digital volume control) and it finds reserves of energy that breathe fresh life into movies. It is completely free from the harshness and glassiness of a hard-driven yet underpowered AVR and you could watch film after film via the MC-5S and never grow weary of putting on another disc. The mellifluous detailing is ever warm and inviting and the way dialogue forms so naturally in the room is a pleasure from titles to credits. Those charms port perfectly to two-channel music, too. Here, with the other three channels in standby mode, the MC-5S seems even more potent and robust.

Going its own way

This amp is certainly not the last word in dynamic movie crescendos, bass attack or startling effects from near silence – and for that you probably do need transistor power. The soundstage is not as wide open and airy as some transistor power amps in its class either, but the MC-5S generates an intense ambience with movies and sumptuous stereo detailing with consummate ease.

Out here at the higher end of the power amplification business the best products tend to do their own thing in their own way, and the Ming Da is almost unique in every respect. *HCC* warming to valve amps? Who would have thought... ■


Each MC-5S is hand-built. As you can see, that takes some time...

Specifications

POWER OUTPUT (CLAIMED): 5 x 70W
CONNECTIONS: 5 x single phono inputs; 1 x stereo input; umbilical PSU connections; five pairs of gold-plated speaker terminals
DIMENSIONS: 620(w) x 400(d) x 220(h)mm
WEIGHT: 40kg
ALSO FEATURING: 10 KT90 beam pentode valves; massive outboard power supply; side-mounted switchgear; illuminated VU meters; switchable five-channel/two-channel mode; standby mode; supplied with white gloves for handling

HCC Verdict



Ming Da MC-5S
→ £4,000 Approx → www.mingda.co.uk
→ Tel: 01684 293111
HIGHS: Unique look, build and concept; rich and inviting sound; lush with stereo music
LOWS: It's huge and awkward to place; drinks electricity; could be a bit more dynamic with action movies

Performance ★★★★½
Design ★★★★☆
Features ★★★★☆
Overall ★★★★☆

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Lowering the cost of Full HD projection

Optoma's HD23 is yet another video-chucker with a sub-£1,000 price tag. **Benny Har-Even** finds a lot to like with both Blu-rays and HD games – as long as they're not 3D...

AV Info

PRODUCT:
Full HD 2D projector

POSITION:
Optoma's second-from-bottom entry-level home cinema PJ

PEERS:
BenQ W1060; Epson EH-TW3200

IT'S FAIR TO say that for a sizable number of people, dimensionalised content, be it at the cinema or back at home, is simply not their thing. But for me, given the right material, I'm rather partial to viewing my movies in 3D.

If you're with me on this particular AV viewpoint there's a good chance that the Optoma HD23 is of no interest at all. This sub-£1,000 projector makes its stance on the 3D matter quite clear – it's simply not having any of it.

However, while it might be a strictly 2D-only affair, the Optoma does have a bunch of star features. Firstly, it's a Full HD model capable of displaying 1080p at a native 24 frames per second, these days the minimum standard for any light box hoping for residence in a serious home cinema. Secondly, there's a decent maximum of 2,500 Lumens on offer, a figure that promises serious fun with the lights on. Thirdly there's its price – it can be found for less than its £800 – low enough to attract anyone's interest.

The Optoma HD23 is powered by a Texas Instruments DarkChip3 DMD device. Yet the claimed 5,000:1 contrast ratio is fairly modest-sounding and with a six-segment single colour wheel, there's a chance that rainbow noise could also come along to spoil the party. As such, it's going to have to keep that under control and get everything else right to keep me impressed.

Coffee table cinema

Out of the box the HD23 gets off to a promising start. Its white curvy housing is easy on the eye, a boon for an object that is just as likely to be placed on a coffee table for occasional lounge use as it is being mounted to the ceiling. Compared to JVC's 'entry-level' X35, it's almost miniscule, and the 2.9kg weight makes it easily ported around.



Optoma's remote is small, simple to use and backlit

Inputs are respectable – two HDMI v1.3 ports, a component input, a PC VGA input, and, for the criminally insane, a composite input. A 12V trigger is also in place at the rear, making it a contender for those wanting to pair it with an electric screen. I can remember when projectors costing three times as much ignored such a connection. Thankfully, it seems the AV world has started seeing sense.

Zooming around

A simple zoom and focus ring system is used for setup. However, due to the lack of any lens shift (either horizontal or vertical), nor horizontal keystone correction, I did have some issues setting up in my quite typical

> 'I was entranced by the ability of the HD23 to pick out every piece of dirt and grime on R2-D2's bodywork'

lounge environment. This means that central placement at a good height is highly advised, and I was forced to extend two of the three plastic feet to get a level image. However, I was eventually pleased with the 80in image I obtained from a distance of three metres and, room permitting, you can go up to 300m. At that size you'll probably be glad of the sheer brightness of the image the HD23 chucks out. With the Optoma's 'Bright' mode, I could comfortably watch a movie or play a game with the lights on, and even on a tamer calibrated setting in a darkened room the image was never short of vibrancy and pop. The projector's 'lights-on entertainment' branding is justified.

Menu options are basic but there are enough options, such as Contrast, Brightness, Colour, Tint and Sharpness, to allow some decent tweaking of the picture. The Advanced options sub-menu offers up Noise Reduction, Gamma adjustments and Colour temperature, and you can alter RGB Gain Bias, which I found necessary to take out the HD23's slight over-enthusiasm for red tones.

There are Cinema, Bright, Photo, and Reference modes but I found that switching to User mode and making some basic tweaks gave the best pictures by far.

Adjusting settings is easily managed from the curvy, backlit handset.

A new hope

Once aligned to my screen and setup, the HD23's images were something of a revelation: I had to keep reminding myself that they were coming from an £800 projector. As Darth Vader's 501st legion storms Princess Leia's Corellian cruiser in *Star Wars: A New Hope* on Blu-ray, the bright white of the interior walls virtually seared my eyeballs, and I was entranced by the ability of the HD23 to pick out every piece of grime and dirt on the casings of R2-D2 and C-3PO as they went their separate ways in the Tatooine desert.

The chaotic opening space battle of *Revenge of the Sith*, meanwhile, showed adequate black levels, but certainly not the deepest. To boost dark scenes, the HD23 offers an Image AI mode that tries to increase black levels by dynamically reducing brightness based on scene content, but I found the constant brightness shifts jarring and soon turned this off.

Back on planet Earth, Daniel Craig's rugged features as he boards his private jet in *Casino Royale* demonstrated accurate skin tones and the varied locations of *Mission Impossible: Ghost Protocol* served to demonstrate good overall colour balance. More expensive projectors will undoubtedly deliver images that eke out more texture and detail than the HD23 was able to muster, but overall I found I kept getting lost in whatever I was watching instead of noting any problems – always a good sign.

Good for gaming

Optoma isn't alone in marketing its affordable models as ideal for gaming as well as movie-watching. And who can argue with it? There are plenty of console titles around that simply demand to be played on as big a canvas as possible. With this in mind, I also spent time enveloped in the dark, moody world of *Batman: Arkham Asylum* via a PlayStation 3. Gameplay proved to be fast and fluid, but I did note that this is a 3D-enabled title and began to lament the ability to check it out stereoscopically.

As for the rainbow effect, after hours of viewing it simply wasn't an issue for me. However, this particular video nasty is very much a personal thing, so I recommend getting a demo before buying to see if it's a cause for concern.

In terms of real downsides, the lack of any sophisticated processing is presumably responsible for the HD23's tendency to throw up image noise over areas of solid colour, and in quiet moments the hum from the projector was a touch intrusive. Overall, though, I was nothing less than delighted with the Optoma HD23. I still miss 3D, and the lack of any lens shift function is annoying considering the rest of the unit's setup flexibility, but its faults are a small price to pay for what is ultimately, well, a small price to pay.

As such, this is easily recommended. Movie fans should check it out. And, if the forthcoming HD25 model, which adds 3D playback to the bargain, can maintain this respectable performance, then they should probably check that out, too ■

On the menu

→ Compared to more expensive rivals, Optoma's user menus are very basic. Tweakers can make adjustments to gamma and colour temperature from within the Advanced section

Specifications

3D: No
FULL HD: Yes. 1,920 x 1,080
CONNECTIONS: 2 x HDMI v1.3; component video input; D-Sub PC input; composite video input; 12V trigger port
BRIGHTNESS (CLAIMED): 2,500 ANSI Lumens
CONTRAST (CLAIMED): 5,000:1
DIMENSIONS: 324(w) x 234(d) x 97(h)
WEIGHT: 2.9kg
FEATURES: DMD DLP six-segment wheel with BrilliantColour; 0.65in 1080p Texas Instruments DarkChip3; 24fps mode; 230W lamp; 4,000-hour lamp life (in Eco mode); Cinema, Bright, Photo, Reference, User modes; 1.50-1.8 throw ratio; 0.96-7.64m 16:9 diagonal screen size; 1.5-125m projection distance; Superwide cropping feature; Image AI

HCC Verdict



Optoma HD23
→ £800 Approx → www.optoma.co.uk
→ Tel: 01923 691 800
HIGHS: Very bright, sharp image packed with detail; decent price
LOWS: Modest black level performance; lack of lens shift makes setup tricky; a tad noisy; no 3D playback

Performance ★★★★☆
Design ★★★★☆
Features ★★★☆☆
Overall ★★★★☆

Posh spice

Is the beauty of Loewe's new 55in TV any more than skin deep? **John Archer** investigates



ANYONE WHO BUYS a Loewe TV isn't just buying a Loewe TV. They're also buying into an ecosystem of customisable design and bespoke features that's unique in its flexibility.

Take the Loewe Connect ID 55 under scrutiny here. When you combine the colour options for its frame and bottom section with the various stands and mounts, you arrive at, Loewe claims, more than 4,320 different iterations. That's a tough choice...

Regarding features, if you add £300 to the Connect ID 55's (surprisingly approachable by Loewe standards) £2,495 starting price, you can get a built-in 'DR+' HDD recording system that stores digital streams from the Freeview HD tuner for lossless recordings.

You can also partner the TV with a full Loewe home cinema audio system controllable via the TV (though only using the set's tortuous onscreen menu system).

The Connect ID 55 helps justify its price by supporting multimedia playback from USB sticks or networked (via Wi-Fi or Ethernet) devices. The network connections also allow access to Loewe's online service. This packs BBC iPlayer, but not NetFlix, LoveFilm, Acetrax or Blinkbox.

AV adventures

While the Loewe's bespoke options are arguably its main attraction, I'd still like it to offer serious AV quality. Yet first impressions of its pictures are underwhelming.

Problem one is backlight inconsistency. Using the provided image presets invariably leaves dark scenes, such as Batman's underground fight with Bane in *The Dark Knight Rises*, blighted by distracting clouds of unwanted brightness.

Second, when watching 3D, deep shots like those showing the city at the start of Pete Travis' *Dredd 3D* are rife with crosstalk. So much so that it effectively discounts the Connect ID 55 as a serious 3D option.

Troubling though these problems are, 3D remains of minimal interest to many, and I tackled the wayward backlight by reducing the TV's contrast setting. This lessens the image's dynamism, of course, but the result is still enjoyable if you can darken your room.

I then started to spot the Connect ID 55's good points. Colours are reasonably rich yet deliver plenty of blend finesse. Motion is well-handled too; with the set's DMM processing in play (on its lowest level) the action-packed Dredd-vs-two Gatling guns sequence is only slightly affected by resolution loss and judder, and doesn't look over-processed.

The Connect ID 55 also delivers plenty of detail and clarity with HD, and neatly upscales standard-def. Sonically, meanwhile, it's a cut far above the norm.

So, thanks to the uniqueness of its design and feature flexibility, the Connect ID 55 ticks all the key boxes of its target audience. Yet if Loewe also wants to reel in new fans, it could do with improving some aspects of its picture quality for its next product generation ■

AV Info

PRODUCT: 55in 3D LED TV with customisable design and features

POSITION: Effectively part of Loewe's mid-range

PEERS: Samsung UE55ES8000; Panasonic TX-L55WT50

Specifications

3D: Yes. Active
FULL HD: Yes. 1,920 x 1,080
TUNER: Yes. Freeview HD, satellite and cable options, plus CI slot if required
CONNECTIONS: 3 x HDMI (v1.4); 2 x USB; component video; Mini-Scart; digital audio input; digital audio output; D-Sub PC input, RS-232; IR-Link; Motor control; Ethernet
SOUND: 2 x 10W plus 1 x 20W
BRIGHTNESS (CLAIMED): 400cd/m2
CONTRAST RATIO (CLAIMED): 6,000,000:1 dynamic
DIMENSIONS (OFF STAND): 1,258(w) x 784(h) x 77(d)mm
WEIGHT (OFF STAND): 28.3kg
FEATURES: Built-in Wi-Fi; USB multimedia playback; Image+ processing engine; DMM motion processing; optional built-in recording system; multiple colour and stand design options; extra speaker system options; 200Hz; MediaNet online services

HCC Verdict

Loewe Connect ID 55
→ From £2,500 Approx → www.loewe-uk.com
→ Tel: 0207 368 1100
HIGHS: Remarkable range of design options; good colour response and sharpness; good sound quality
LOWS: Backlight inconsistencies unless you heavily reduce the contrast setting; serious crosstalk with 3D; fiddly operating system

Performance ★★★½☆
Design ★★★★★
Features ★★★★☆
Overall ★★★★☆

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AVR of the old school

The Cambridge Audio Azur 651R is an unapologetic traditionalist when it comes to home cinema. **Steve May** goes looking for an S-Video source

THE AZUR 651R is a heavy duty, lavishly-engineered AVR clearly aimed at fans of the Cambridge Audio aesthetic. It's also unapologetically retro. While rival receiver makers scramble to position their behemoth boxes as hedonistic hubs with multifarious media options and network niceties, the 651R is a Burgundian Pimlico (via Ealing Studios) by contrast, declaring itself independent of internet radio, streaming media services and other social mores – a bold proposition given the asking price.

The 651R is closely related to the step-up £1,600 Azur 751R, but there are key differences between the two: the more expensive model has slightly more brawn, extra HDMI inputs, and features 24-bit/192kHz upscaling of all inputs, plus a 24-bit Asynchronous USB.

However, it's not short of home cinema necessities and the odd extravagance, including Dolby Pro-Logic IIz height processing if you're looking for extra sonic air and Pure Analogue Stereo Direct for bypassing all processing for an unfettered feed. We've seen direct multichannel inputs vanish from some AVRs, but they're still available here – brilliant news if you're nursing hi-res audio formats with a player that outputs via a fistful of phonos.

The receiver is a seven-channel design, but if you don't want to use the back surrounds, you can redirect the available amplification to feed stereo into a second zone. If you need the Full Monty, as well as multizone, there are pre-outs available. A useful Follow Main feature allows this second zone output to mimic the main stage.

There's very little that can't be hooked up to the 651R. Rear-placed connections include four HDMI inputs, ten digital audio inputs and two LFE pre-outs. There's also a full range of analogue ports, including three component inputs. The 651R sports two HDMI outs, which can give a simultaneous feed. The rear of the receiver also features an ominously large X-Tract fan.



Cambridge Audio rates the Azur 651R at 100W per channel into eight Ohms

AV Info

PRODUCT:
Seven-channel AV receiver

POSITION:
Feature-stripped version of the £1,600 Azur 751R

PEERS:
Onkyo TX-NR818; Pioneer SC-2022; Denon AVR-2313

Build quality is excellent. The stiff, low-resonance chassis inspires immediate confidence with its 17.4kg bulk, while the metal fascia appears bulletproof. The design is a tad cluttered though, with a sprinkling of buttonry.

The UI of the 651R is basic, eschewing graphics for a simple text menu, but it's quick to navigate and relatively self-explanatory. Auto-calibration comes from Audyssey 2EQ. The system does a reasonable job setting up levels and correctly assessed the distances of my enclosures, but I found it overly keen to set the crossover low, causing the front L/C/R to sound a little gloopy. A better balance was achieved with manual intervention.

Total excitement

While the Cambridge Audio Azur 651R may need to call on Matt Murdoch to defend its feature spread, there's no doubting its heroic performance. This is an exciting AVR to listen to. Running in a 7.2 configuration, the 651R has little trouble erecting a substantial wall of sound. Front-soundstage imaging is clean and broad with copious power. When Colin Farrell is offered the option of being a Secret Agent at Rekall (*Total Recall*, Blu-ray), a musical pulse of recognition ripples satisfyingly from the rears. The ensuing firefight is suitably bombastic; this receiver hits hard!

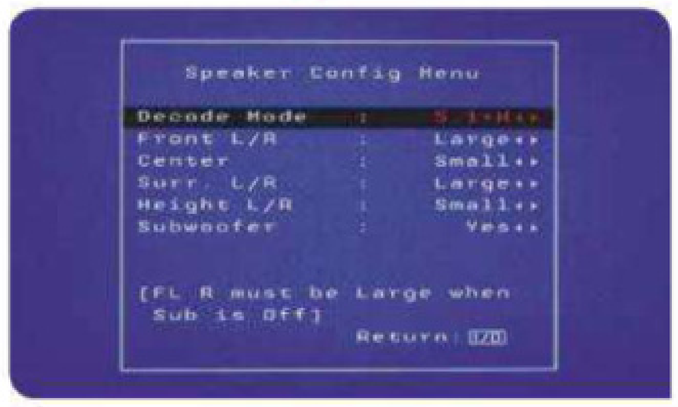
Most users will toe a conventional line with channel deployment. For what it's worth, I did find that running the 651R in a 5.1 plus height configuration transpired to be quite a lot of fun. Spreading the front soundstage higher and wider is rather engaging with certain content.

Thankfully, the X-Tract fan works with whisper-quiet efficiency. However, it wasn't long into my audition that I became aware of a low-level mains hum from my sample's transformer. It was masked with the AVR in full flow, but omnipresent when the unit was on.

Big question

With great build quality and an eager-to-please power plant, the Azur 651R ticks the right boxes when it comes to traditional home cinema values. Feed it a high-quality movie soundtrack and it shines. The bigger question for any buyer revolves around the conservative specification. The lack of network functionality and USB playback is a little galling, but not the end of the world. You can partner the AVR with a dedicated media playing source, or Cambridge's own Stream Magic Network audio player. If you can live with this caveat, the 651R is certainly worth considering ■

On the menu



→ Like its higher-end stablemate, the Azur 651R features a foolproof, but visually uninspiring, user interface – and, because the AVR has no truck with home networking, smartphone/tablet control isn't an option

Specifications

DOLBY TRUEHD: Yes. And Pro-Logic IIz
DTS-HD MASTER AUDIO: Yes
THX: No
MULTICHANNEL INPUT: Yes. 7.1 phono inputs
MULTICHANNEL OUTPUT (CLAIMED): 7 x 100W (eight Ohms)
MULTIROOM: Yes. Second stereo zone
AV INPUTS: 4 x composite; 4 x S-Video; 10 x digital audio (5 x optical and 5 x coaxial)
HDMI: Yes. 4 x inputs, 2 x outputs, v.14
COMPONENT VIDEO: Yes. 3 x inputs, 1 x output
VIDEO UPSCALING: Yes. To 1080p
DIMENSIONS: 430(w) x 150(h) x 420(d)mm
WEIGHT: 17.4kg
ALSO FEATURING: Anchor Bay video upscaler; Audyssey 2EQ calibration; FM/AM tuner; 'Follow Main' second zone feature; second zone remote; Cirrus Logic 24-bit/192kHz DACs; TI Aureus DA788 32-bit DSPs; 2 x 12V triggers; RS-232; headphone output; Pure Analogue Stereo Direct; low-resonance full-metal chassis; twin subwoofer outputs



HCC Verdict

Cambridge Audio Azur 651R
→ £1,200 Approx → www.cambridgeaudio.com
→ Tel: 0207 940 2200
HIGHS: Excellent build quality; gutsy multichannel performance; analogue multichannel inputs
LOWS: No network functionality or file playback; no HDMI passthrough; low-level transformer hum

Performance ★★★★☆
Design ★★★½☆
Features ★★★☆☆
Overall ★★★½☆

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STONED
We sample *Savages*, the new narcotics thriller from Oliver Stone, on p103

Sale of the century

LG's Ultra HD and OLED ambitions are all well and good, but **John Archer** reckons that sometimes you just can't beat a bargain plasma

AV Info

PRODUCT:
Budget Full HD 50in plasma TV with USB multimedia playback

POSITION:
Not actually at the bottom of LG's plasma pile

PEERS:
Panasonic TX-P50X50; Samsung PS51E450

TO SAY THAT plasma technology isn't LG's main focus right now would be an understatement akin to saying that giving birth stings a little bit. If it's Ultra HD, OLED or Passive-3D-super-slim-LED flavoured, LG is all over it. On the other hand, LG's ever-dwindling plasma TV range is starting to feel more like an obligation to the Korean brand than something its heart is truly in.

Oddly, though, this isn't necessarily a bad thing, for if LG's 50PA650T is anything to go by, a plasma policy of just keeping things simple and prices low can work very nicely.

At the time of writing we've found the 50PA650T selling for under £500. This is an exceptionally low sum for a 50in plasma display, especially when you consider it still deploys such features as a Full HD resolution (when LG still offers models with only 1,024 x 768 panels); a Freeview HD tuner; 600Hz sub-field driving; and even enough picture calibration tools – including gamma and colour management – to bag the 50PA650T the endorsement of the Imaging Science Foundation (ISF). This means an ISF engineer could come round and professionally calibrate the 50PA650T's images for you – but remember that such a service is likely to cost around half the price of the LG...

Back to reality

Time now, though, for a reality check. The 50PA650T's price does come with a few inevitable feature strings attached. The set can't communicate with LG's excellent online Smart TV services, for starters. Nor can you stream in photo, movie and music files from a networked PC (the Ethernet jack is only there as part of the Freeview HD spec), and nor is there any 3D playback. Does that make it a no-go for some of you? Probably.

The 50PA650T is not a bad looker, though. Its frame is reasonably narrow – albeit no challenge to the unfeasible slimness of some

LED-based TVs – and its rear doesn't stick out as far as other budget plasmas. There's nothing particularly imaginative about its shaping and finish, but overall it still looks more expensive than it actually is.

The most important connections run to a trio of HDMIs, a D-Sub PC port, a component video port and a USB port. The latter is your only avenue of multimedia playback, but unfortunately cannot be used to archive material from the screen's in-built tuner.

There are also RGB Scart and composite inputs for those still living in 2002.

Fishy business

We've been spoiled in the last twelve months by some outstanding premium plasma TVs from Panasonic and Samsung (and hope to be imminently spoiled again when we get our mitts on the former brand's ZT60...). The low-priced 50PA650T is an altogether different kettle of fish, but in many ways, it doesn't disappoint.

Its contrast performance, for starters, is streets ahead of anything a similarly cheap

> 'The LG 50PA650T is a brilliant cut-price option for anyone who wants a good-quality bigscreen TV'

LCD TV might muster, enabling it to present dark shots, like the exteriors of the vampire attack on the train in *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter*, remarkably convincingly in terms of both the depth of black produced and the amount of shadow detail retained.

What's more, since the 50PA650T uses self-emissive plasma rather than LCD technology, the screen doesn't have to suck all of the brightness out of dark pictures to deliver a convincing black colour, leaving them looking punchy and engaging. There is a little low-level grey fizzing in dark areas, though, but this is a frequent plasma issue and doesn't prove much of a distraction if you're watching from a sensible distance.

The 50PA650T's impressive contrast efforts remain intact even if you have to watch from a quite extreme viewing angle (although we hope your setup doesn't require this!), with none of the contrast and colour potency reductions witnessed with LCD TVs during off-axis viewing.

Tangerine dream

With HD, the 50PA650T's colours lack some of the punch of good LCD TVs, yet they compensate for this by delivering surprisingly natural hues – even when it comes to skin tones. Only the curiously orange skin of Joseph Gordon-Levitt in *Looper* on Blu-ray looks a bit weird on this budget bigscreen – but then that didn't even look natural when I saw the film at the cinema.

Switching to standard-def introduces a few more slightly off-key tones, especially where greens are concerned. Otherwise, the 50PA650T acquits itself nicely with standard-definition fare. LG's SD-HD resolution upscaler tech seemingly chooses to leave images looking a touch soft but natural rather than pushing sharpness so much that source noise becomes exaggerated. Just make sure you avoid the provided noise reduction and edge enhancement features built into the 50PA650T's elegantly structured and good-looking onscreen menus.

Another string to the 50PA650T's budget bow, especially when considered against rival LCD screens around this price point, is its motion clarity. The whirling axes and arms of Lincoln and his associates during the attack on the country house in ...*Vampire Hunter* look clean and crisp under the guidance of its 600Hz sub-field system. Camera pans reveal a little judder, but seldom to an annoying degree, and it's also surprising to see that the 50PA650T suffers less with fizzing noise over skin tones than Panasonic's mighty VT50 plasma series.

Falling short

Having introduced a Panasonic plasma TV to proceedings, it must be said that the 50PA650T isn't as all-round impressive as the latest current TVs from Panasonic. Or Samsung, for that matter. Its black levels, in particular, aren't nearly as profound, and from my experience it suffers more than most modern plasmas with image retention. Bright parts of pictures can leave a ghostly echo for a moment or two, although this problem should reduce as you run the panel in.

The 50PA650T could also be problematic if the room you want to put it in is very bright, thanks to the rather reflective finish of the glass panel across its front and the fact that its pictures aren't as vibrant and bold as those offered by LED sets. You can, of course, experiment with the LG's different picture presets to give the image a little more luminosity for regular daytime viewing. No one wants to sit in pitch darkness to watch *Homes Under the Hammer*.

LG's low-cost bigscreen option definitely does not deserve to have me finish on a negative note. Combine some decently well-rounded audio from the 2 x 10W speaker array to its unexpectedly movie-friendly picture quality, and you're left with a brilliant cut-price option for anyone who wants a good-quality bigscreen TV and doesn't mind sacrificing a few feature bells and whistles to get it. And if you're really on a budget, LG sells an even more affordable 50incher ■

On the menu



→ With online capabilities ignored, the LG's menus aren't the most extensive, yet the layout is neatly arranged and we continue to like the brand's simplified, colourful icons

Specifications

3D: No
FULL HD: Yes. 1,920 x 1,080
TUNER: Yes. Freeview HD, plus CI slot
CONNECTIONS: 3 x HDMI; USB port; D-Sub PC port; RS-232; composite video; RGB Scart; component video input; digital audio output; RF input
BRIGHTNESS (CLAIMED): N/A
CONTRAST RATIO (CLAIMED): 3,000,000:1
SOUND: 2 x 10W
DIMENSIONS (OFF STAND): 1,168(w) x 704(h) x 53(d)mm
WEIGHT (OFF STAND): 26.4kg
FEATURES: ISF certification; colour management; gamma controls; noise reduction; edge enhancer; 600Hz sub-field driving; multimedia playback from USB storage systems; Triple XD Engine

HCC Verdict



LG 50PA650T
→ £500 Approx → www.lg.com/uk
→ Tel: 0844 847 5454
HIGHS: Remarkably affordable; good overall pictures; nice design considering the price; USB file playback
LOWS: A little image retention during initial use; no Smart features or online capability; pictures lack brightness versus LCD

Performance ★★★★☆
Design ★★★★☆
Features ★★★☆☆
Overall ★★★★☆

Super-sized cinema hero

Philips' 7000 series LED is both big and clever. One of which describes **John Archer**



Philips' Smart platform still needs more VOD

PHILIPS' 55PFL7007 IS not only the most all-round appealing TV in the Dutch brand's current range, it's also one of the best 55in TVs we've seen, period.

Its appeal starts with its design, combining a slim bezel with a lovely metallic finish. It's also well connected, with five HDMIs, three USBs, an Ethernet port and built-in Wi-Fi, and the latter connections deliver wide-ranging multimedia support and a solid online platform (though the latter could do with more video services).

The ultimate highlight, though, is its picture quality. *Brave* on Blu-ray is dazzlingly bright and colourful, and the extreme colour punch isn't achieved at the cost of either natural tones or blend subtleties.

The 55PFL7007 is also extremely assured with motion, as Philips' potent Pixel Precise HD processing engine sympathetically reduces blur and judder. The crisp motion feeds into a generally sharp, textured HD picture with detailed Blu-rays like *Apocalypto*. Best of all, the 55PFL7007 produces deep, uniform blacks without compromising the image's overall brightness. The only exception to this occurs during dark 3D fare, as the need for the panel to run brighter with 3D can cause gentle light 'jets' in the corners.

Otherwise, though, the 55PFL7007's 3D images are exceptional, and they're joined by a potent audio performance. This is a 55in TV you will ignore at your peril ■

HCC VERDICT

Philips 55PFL7007T → £1,700

Overall ★★★★½

TELYHD → Approx £230

Video calling goes largescreen

Martin Pipe's long-lost relatives beware! He's got a Skype cam and he's not afraid to use it

SKYPE BOASTS OVER 600m users worldwide, and its internet-phone services are mostly free. Call quality is superior to conventional landlines and, provided the connection is good, video conversations in HD are possible.

That even international calls are essentially *gratis* remains, however, the service's biggest draw. You can get it on smartphones and Macs/PCs, but computer-free 'Skyping' is also welcome. Brands like Panasonic and Samsung realise this, both offering routes via their Smart TVs.

Those without such gear could, however, consider the TelyHD, a device that Skype-enables any HDTV. Redolent of the Xbox 360's Kinect sensor, the handset-driven TelyHD can be placed on a shelf, tripod-mounted or fitted (with adjustable clamp) on top of your telly. It plugs into a spare HDMI socket; network connection, meanwhile, is via Ethernet or Wi-Fi.



Plop this on the top of your TV for easy-to-use HD video calling

The device incorporates a mic, 720p camera and SD slot for photo-sharing with other TelyHD-equipped pals. New users can sign up via TelyHD, but doing so from Skype's website is easier. Your phonebook takes the form of an Apple-like carousel; there's also a user-search facility.

During calls, your outgoing video appears onscreen alongside that of your correspondent. A software camera 'zoom' and audio-only calls are supported. With good lighting, picture quality exceeds expectations, although what you see from the other party depends on their kit; largescreen TVs highlight compression artifacts.

A chat with a relative in Japan was reliable, with fair-quality video and intelligible audio from my TV's speakers. A worthwhile product for the chat-happy with overseas connections, then... ■

HCC VERDICT

TelyHD → £230

Overall ★★★★☆

Xeo

Dynaudio Wireless High-End



Xeo is new, Xeo is easy, Xeo is smart, Xeo is game-changing. Because Xeo is the very first wireless and remote controlled High-End loudspeaker system. Say goodbye to speaker cables, D/A converters, amplifiers and special software. Unplug them all. And simply plug in the Xeo compact or floor standing loudspeakers and the Xeo Transmitter. Unplug and play. www.xeo.dynaudio.com

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Feedback

Got an axe to grind? Need to comment on current technology? Want to share your knowledge with our readers? **HCC** is here to help

Is my speaker hurting my TV?

I read with interest your article on centre speakers (HCC #217). I agree that locating the centre speaker can be awkward, yet because it is a key part of the audio experience I tend to accept this inconvenience for the greater good. Yet I'm wondering whether a fault on my LCD TV is due to the centre speaker being located too close to the panel and I would appreciate your thoughts.

My original setup was comprised of two Tannoy Revolution Signature DC6 T (floorstanders) for the front L/R, DC6 (bookshelf) as the rears and a DC4 LCR as the centre speaker.

When I purchased the original setup I would have liked the DC6 LCR but it was not only more expensive but also significantly larger and raised questions about whether it would fit in my room.

Having purchased the DC4 LCR, the rear of the centre speaker was, as you suggest, located close to the TV (a 46in Samsung UE46B7020) but with the front of the speaker in the same horizontal plane as the front left and right speakers. The rear of the centre speaker was 20cm from the TV.

I ran with this setup for over three years and enjoyed many movies, with most played exceptionally loud when I got the chance. A couple of months ago a large hi-fi/home cinema chain was selling the DC6 LCR at a



Tannoy's magnetically-shielded centre speaker shouldn't affect your TV

★ Star letter... Region coding? Schmegion coding!

Having just ordered myself a region-free Oppo BDP-103EU, it was interesting to see your article on region coding. In my opinion, with a now global market, thanks to the internet, there is no place for region coding anymore. It is impractical and unenforceable, because there are no laws to prevent you importing them... so why bother?

I was finally swayed by my most recent purchases. I have always been a massive fan of *The Cell* (with Jennifer Lopez), but there was no Region B release. Yes, I found a way to get round that, by ripping an import version, but why should I have to do that? Then I had to resort to buying *Bullet in the Head* on DVD, because there was no Region B version... it's madness. Region-locked players are suitable for every country voltage-wise, so what is the point in locking them? I could simply buy a Region A, B & C version of a cheap player, and use them all with no problems.

Region-free releases ensure worldwide sales, and you would have thought the movie industry was mature enough to realise that. They want people to respect them and buy the originals, so they should respect us, the people, and let us buy them... otherwise people will take the alternative approach, and that achieves nothing that benefits the movie industry. Music isn't region-locked, literature isn't region-locked... it's time for the movie industry to grow up.

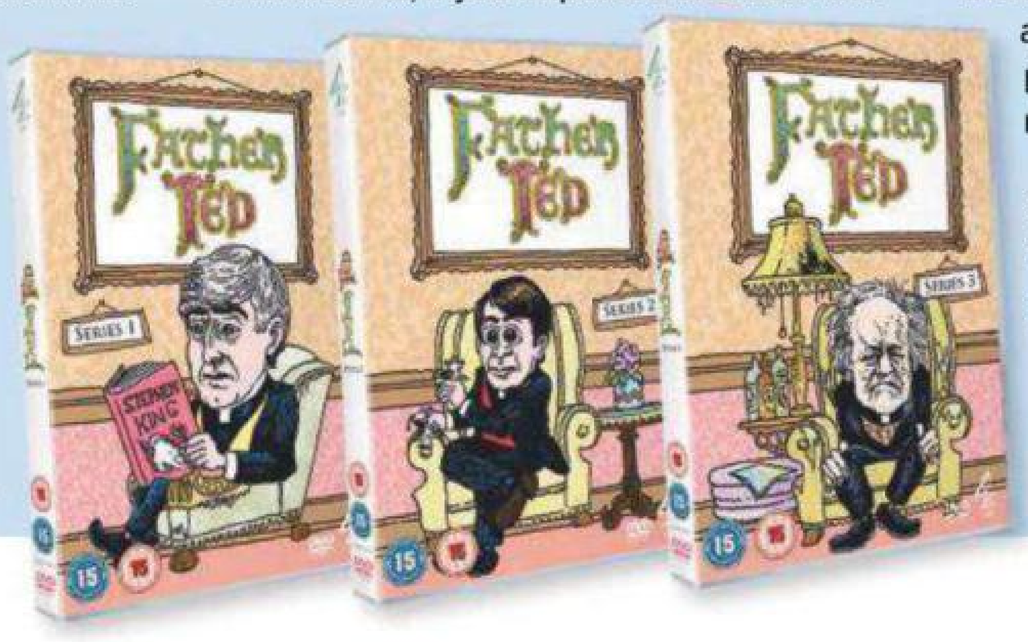
Lee Cawley, via email

Anton van Beek replies: We agree with your comments, Lee. Region coding on BD is even more annoying that it was on DVD, because at least you knew where you stood with the latter – if you bought a disc in the UK it was R2, if you imported one from the US it would be R1. On Blu-ray, unless you really do your research, it's more of a lottery, with individual studios locking some titles while encoding others for 'All Regions'.

Much of this comes down to the issue of international licensing, with different distributors having the rights to a title in different parts of the world. Perhaps the best summation of the situation is on the screen that greets you when you try to play one of Eureka's Region B-locked Masters of Cinema Blu-rays on a Region A deck:

'We hoped you wouldn't have to see this screen. We apologise profusely but we have been forced to encode this disc Region B at the express insistence of the film's licensor and a global industry afraid of a level playing field. Music and books are not region encoded – why should films be?'

Star letter-writer Lee Cawley wins copies of *Father Ted: Series 1*, *2*, and *3* on DVD courtesy of our chums at 4DVD. The releases come with brand-new commentaries and interviews and are available to buy from March 11, priced at £10 each approximately.



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Surely all home cinema speakers also play music equally well? The answer is sadly not. Reviewer after reviewer criticise the sonic performance of many home cinema style speakers when playing music. Quite simply such speakers are just not good enough. Their sonic shortcomings degrade movie soundtracks just the same as their musical performances.

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discount so I immediately purchased one and looked forward to the sonic upgrade.

Because the DC6 is larger (22.5cm deep as opposed to 17.5cm for the DC4) I had to site the speaker closer to the TV so it was now about 15cm away from the panel. After running with the new speaker for a few weeks I noticed a 'smudge' on the bottom of the TV. The 'smudge' is at the base of the panel, biased slightly to the right of centre, about 25cm wide and 20-25cm high. It's in the shape of a large thumbprint, if that makes sense.

My understanding is that modern LCD TVs (unlike old CRT TVs) are not effected by stray magnetic fields that emanate from a speaker. Plus the speakers are shielded so any magnetic field should be negligible. I removed the speaker for a month but the effect still remained and I have since resorted to my old DC4 LCR – but again the effect continues. Because of the nature of the problem my thoughts are that it is a fault with the panel (the TV is now over three years old) and that it was present with the DC4 LCR but I never noticed it.

Your recommendation in the article is to locate the centre speaker as close to the TV as possible for the best experience. My question is whether the image on a modern LCD TV can be adversely affected by the proximity of a modern shielded centre speaker? Thankfully I have an extended warranty on the TV and an engineer suggested that the panel was faulty and has taken the TV away to have the panel swapped.

Andrew Buglass, via email

Mark Craven replies: You are quite correct and the picture on an LCD television should not be affected by magnets in domestic loudspeakers, as they don't use the steerable beam as found in old CRT TVs. We also had a quick word with our friends at Tannoy and both the Revolution DC4 LCR and the curved cabinet Revolution Signature DC6 LCR (Tannoy did not make standard Revolution DC6 LCR) are both magnetically shielded so they shouldn't have affected the screen image even if you were using a CRT TV. It looks as if your panel developed a fault unrelated to the speakers. And we would certainly recommend placing your centre channel speaker as close to your TV or screen as possible to keep 'dialogue' locked to it. Just don't obscure your image!

Oh, and turn to page 8 for a peek at Tannoy's new Precision series, the successor to your Revolution Signature range.



LG's Ultra HD TV: worth getting, if you have £22,500...

Panasonic brightness

In the last issue you refer to the Panasonic PT-AT6000E projector as not being very bright in 3D. This was a criticism of the 5000 model. Is this an error in your description? The Lumens on the 6000 have been increased to 2,400, which makes it considerably brighter than rival Sony and JVC projectors.

I have recently upgraded to the Panasonic from the PT-AE2000. On my seven-foot screen the 2D and 3D pictures are comparable quality-wise to the local multiplex. Also, of course, Panasonic is currently including two pairs of glasses. My friends and I have found the glasses very good, although they are rather pricey!

David Welford, via email

John Archer replies: First of all, congrats on getting your AT6000E. It's an exceptional model despite the bit of criticism you've spotted in my review.

My comments about the lack of brightness with 3D weren't accidentally picked up from our review of the earlier AT5000, though. While the AT6000E definitely produces brighter 3D pictures than its predecessor, the amount of brightness Panasonic's 3D glasses take out of images still troubles me. The difference between the AT6000E's 2D and 3D brightness levels is so extreme that I found myself thinking (more than with other 3D PJs) that I'd rather watch the extra dynamism and vibrancy evident with flat pictures than the extra depth of 3D.

It also seemed to me that the AT6000E's 3D pictures aren't as bright subjectively as those of some of its rivals, despite the 2,400 Lumens figure comparing favourably. This claimed figure is a lamp output measurement; it doesn't take into account the amount of light stripped out of 3D pictures by Active spex.

I'm certainly not saying the AT6000E is a bad 3D PJ, though – and if you enjoy it, that's all that matters!

Ultra HD – not for me yet!

Your last issue made me laugh. A review of a £22,500 Ultra HD TV and a claim that, basically, Full HD is about to become obsolete. I think I speak for the majority when I say that I can't afford a £22,500 TV so will be sticking to my Full HD display and regular Full HD Blu-rays for a long time to come – especially as 4K Blu-rays aren't even out yet.

Damien Holt, via email

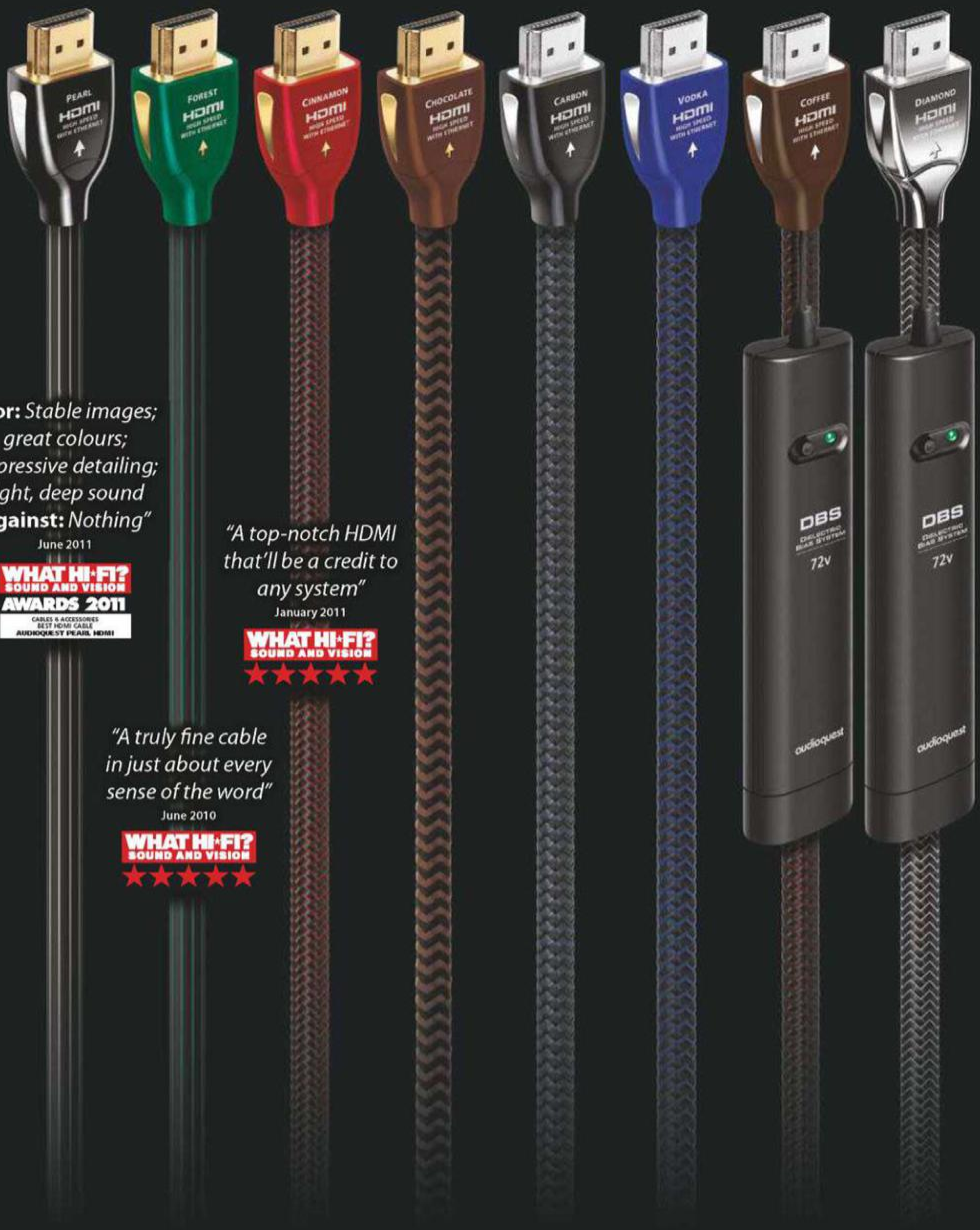
Mark Craven replies: Don't get us wrong, Damien – we're certain that Full HD displays and players will be around for a long time. On the other hand, the growth in interest for 4K/Ultra HD has been remarkable, with manufacturers and broadcasters all clearly putting their eggs in this particularly hi-res basket. Are we over-excited? You bet ■

Contact us...

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Digital Copy

Digital media sales are growing, yet the same is true for Blu-ray. **Mark Craven** reckons that Philips may have turned its back on the hi-def disc format a little too early

WHEN PHILIPS ANNOUNCED recently that it had sold its home entertainment business to the Japanese company Funai for €150m, chief executive Frans van Houten offered a strange viewpoint to the *Wall Street Journal*.

'Since we have online entertainment, people do not buy Blu-ray and DVD players any more,' claimed van Houten as justification for off-loading the BD, DVD and home cinema division at the end of January, leaving the brand to focus on the more profitable health, well-being and lighting side of things.

I'd have to take issue with van Houten. People do still buy Blu-rays and DVD players. It's probably more of a case that they were buying them from other brands.

The Blu-ray format has never been in a healthier state. Disc sales are continuing to rise. True, people don't purchase a new player every time they grab a platter, but I would imagine there's still money to be made in flogging disc-spinners. Maybe not as much as there could be, but **to say that online entertainment has sounded the death knell for physical media and hardware seems a little rash**. Particularly as a BD player is, as Sony has proven, also a great platform from which to stream online content.

People have been claiming that the availability of online content will drive Blu-ray out of business for longer than most of us have owned Blu-ray players. Yet statistics show it's not likely to happen soon. Much trumpeted figures for the UK in 2012 recorded a growth in digital sales and a decline in physical sales, but that is for the whole CD/DVD/BD market. Blu-ray, on the other hand, increased year-on-year sales by 8.9 per cent, with *Avatar* breaking the 1m mark. Back-catalogue sales rose by 18.5 per cent and sales of players themselves grew by 8.3 per cent. This looks healthy to me.

The lowdown on downloads

I can see the reasoning behind the online-only argument, however. Downloads and streaming are clearly growing, and it's much more fun to predict a different future than imagine nothing much will change down the line. Furthermore, the cornerstone of the argument is a good one: digital downloads represent a complete consumer shift and major on convenience. This was the driving force behind the arrival of DVD. Here was a product that looked different and was simpler to use than its VHS predecessor (I'm ignoring LaserDisc. Sorry). To many it probably didn't matter that the picture quality was better.

And this is what I think will always count against Blu-ray, what will stop those 8 per cent increases becoming 800 per cent increases and what gives brands like Philips pause for thought. BD just didn't represent a big enough change of tack from DVD to really capture consumers' imaginations. Round disc, square player, been here before. Neither did the marketing campaign from the Blu-ray Disc Association help much either – 'Like DVD – but better!' is basically all they managed to come up with. Consumer education could have been improved, too. I still meet people who don't know their DVDs will work in a BD player.

Predicting that digital media sales will one day overtake physical sales is like shooting fish in a barrel. Predicting when it will happen is altogether harder. And I think Philips may have jumped the gun a little too early ■

Have you already left Blu-ray behind and gone digital? Let us know: email letters@homecinemachoice.com

Mark Craven has promised not to mention the rise of digital downloads for at least another three months – unless he gets angry about it again



Storemags



Film Fanatic

20th Century Fox's decision to edit the latest *Die Hard* sequel for a 12A certificate at UK cinemas has left **Anton van Beek** effing and blinding...

YIPPEE KI-YAY MOTHER***R!** Just when I thought there couldn't possibly be any additional reasons for me to avoid venturing out to my local cinema, the UK branch of 20th Century Fox has managed to come up with one.

While I can't say that I expected *A Good Day to Die Hard* to be a particularly spectacular film, I was at least looking forward to watching a sequel that promised to take the *Die Hard* franchise back to its R-rated roots after the neutered *Die Hard 4.0*.

After all, here was a blockbuster action franchise that had (until 2007) been aimed squarely at an adult audience; one that never flinched away from ugly, brutal violence and one that continually lived on the edge. No wonder *Team HCC* gave franchise protagonist John McClane the number one spot in its recent rundown of the 25 Greatest Movie Cops.

And, after the dismal PG-13-rated blip that was *Die Hard 4.0* (aka *Live Free or Die Hard*) the series had bounced back with an R-rated sequel for adults (a long-forgotten part of the cinema audience) to savour. Or, at least, that was the case in the US. Here in the UK, studio 20th Century Fox had very different ideas.

This is what seems to have happened: Fox showed the British Board of Film Classification an unfinished cut of *A Good Day to Die Hard* during the post-production process and was advised that it would receive a 15 certificate in its current form. However, the BBFC also made it clear that **a 12A certificate could be achieved if changes were made to some of the film's language and imagery**.

Given the success the studio had with the 12A-rated cut of *Taken 2* at the UK box office, I can only guess that at this moment Fox's bean-counters suddenly turned into something out of a Chuck Jones cartoon, complete with '£' signs for eyes, and the decision was made to edit the film in advance of its genuine submission.

Swearing and violence

Thankfully, the BBFC runs a very informative website (www.bbfc.co.uk) that was able to alert film fans like myself to this fact weeks before they might have wasted money paying to see a child-friendly version of *A Good Day to Die Hard* at the cinema.

And thanks to the BBFC's website, we have a pretty good idea of the type of changes that Fox UK made to the film: '*When the finished film was submitted for formal classification, edits had been made to reduce the number of uses of strong language (both 'f**k' and 'motherf***er') and to reduce sequences of bloody violence, including blood sprays when characters are shot in the head, and punches to restrained individuals.*'

Now, I'm sure that some people will argue that swearing and violence doesn't make a film any better – but they're missing the bigger issue. *A Good Day to Die Hard* was made for an adult audience, but in Blighty we're being stuck with a version edited to a point where even the youngest child could go and watch it as long as they're with somebody over the age of 18.

How could anybody think that this is a good thing? Is Fox really unwilling to risk excluding anybody of any age from its blockbuster movies? If so, it's a stupid decision. Although it might result in more kids going to the cinema, it's also likely to drive more adults to illegal downloads – the only way of seeing the uncut version that is currently playing elsewhere in the world ■

How do you feel about studio-enforced censorship? Let us know: email letters@homecinemachoice.com



Anton van Beek is convinced Fox UK will shortly announce the release of new child-friendly edits of the *Alien* and *Predator* movies on DVD and BD

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CHANCES ARE YOUR flatscreen TV is capable of delivering premium HD visuals, but its standard presets just aren't doing it justice. This is where Datacolor's Spyder4TV HD comes in.

This neat DIY calibration tool is designed to calibrate and make adjustments to the brightness, contrast, colour, tint and colour temperature of your TV in order to create accurate colours for the home environment, all with an easy-to-use software program.

The device gets its name from the arachnoid appearance of the colourimeter clinging to your screen courtesy of its 'bungee' cords. Adjusting these is simple, as is installing the bundled software on your PC or Mac. Fire up one of the disc-based test patterns and away you go.

Thanks to Datacolor, we have three Spyder4TV HDs (worth £100 each) to give away. Just answer the question opposite.

And for more info on the Spyder4TV HD, head to **www.datacolor.com/spyder4TV**



Question:
Who directed the spider-filled 1990 horror movie *Arachnophobia*?

Answer:
A) Steven Spielberg **B)** Joe Dante
C) Frank Marshall

*Email your answer to: Competitions@homecinemachoice.com with **'Datacolor'** as the subject heading*

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Game of Thrones: The Complete Second Season on Blu-ray



This brilliant second outing of the hit US fantasy series is available to buy now on BD, DVD and Digital Download, and thanks to our pals at HBO Home Entertainment we have three Blu-ray copies up for grabs.

Question:
Which author wrote the original books that *Game of Thrones* is based on?

Answer:
A) J. R. R. Tolkien **B)** George R. R. Martin
C) Ian Livingstone

*Email your answer to the above address with **'Game of Thrones'** as the subject heading*

The Bay on Blu-ray



The Bay, the new horror flick from Hollywood heavyweight Barry Levinson, comes to DVD and Blu-ray from Momentum Pictures on 18 March 2013. We've grabbed five copies of the BD to give away so you can scare yourself silly in the comfort of your own cinema room.

Question:
Who starred in Barry Levinson's earlier horror flick *Sphere*?

Answer:
A) Sharon Stone **B)** Oliver Stone
C) Oliver Platt

*Email your answer to the above address with **'The Bay'** as the subject heading*

Star Trek: The Visual Dictionary



This lavish full-colour hardback from DK (www.dk.com) is the perfect treat for Trekkies, offering a detailed exploration of the strange new worlds (and old ones), iconic characters, ships, equipment and alien species of all the *Star Trek* series. We have five copies to beam down to lucky winners.

Question:
What does the T in James T. Kirk stand for?

Answer:
A) Tacitus **B)** Tiberius **C)** Titus

*Email your answer to the above address with **'Star Trek'** as the subject heading*

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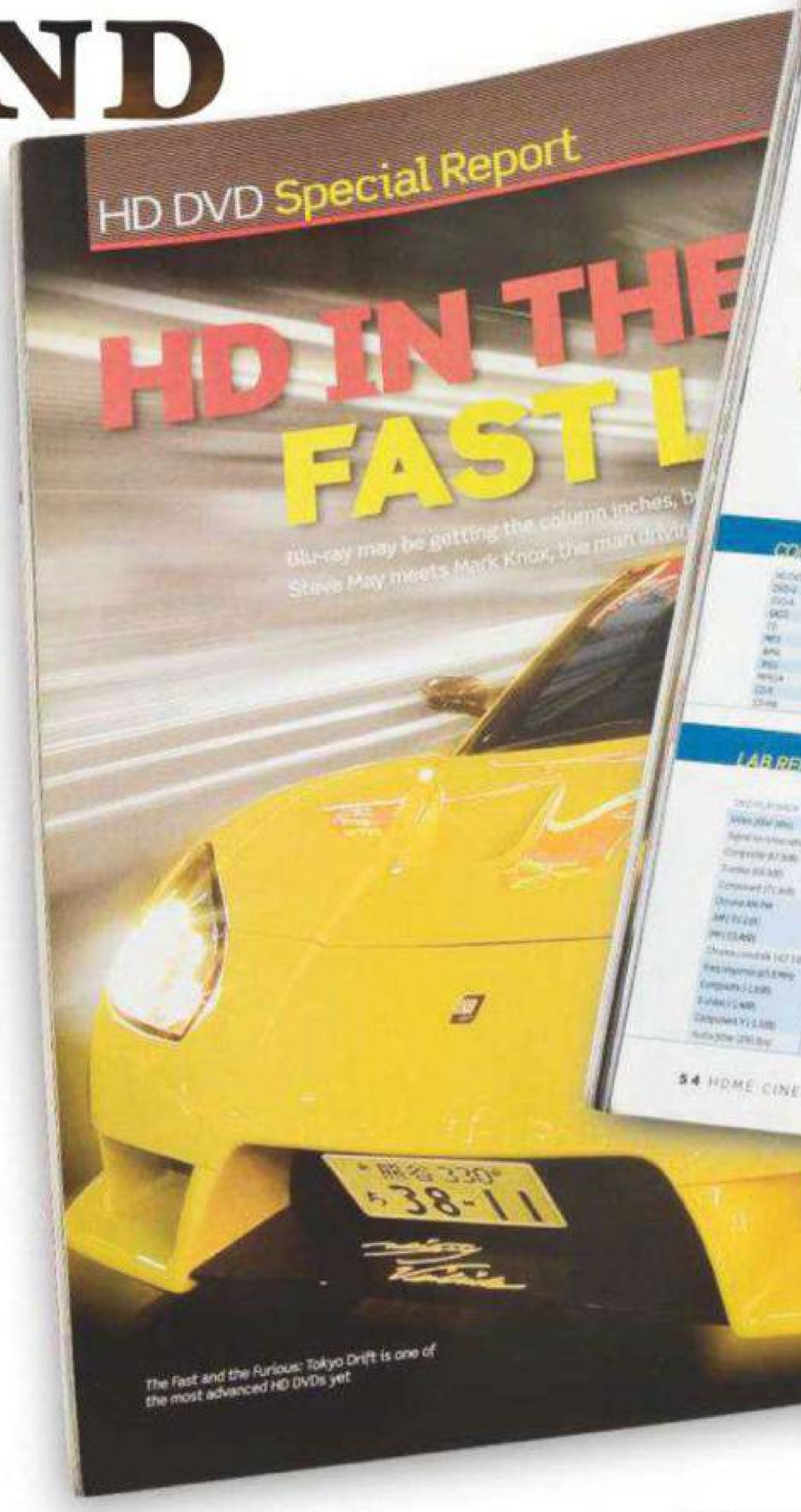
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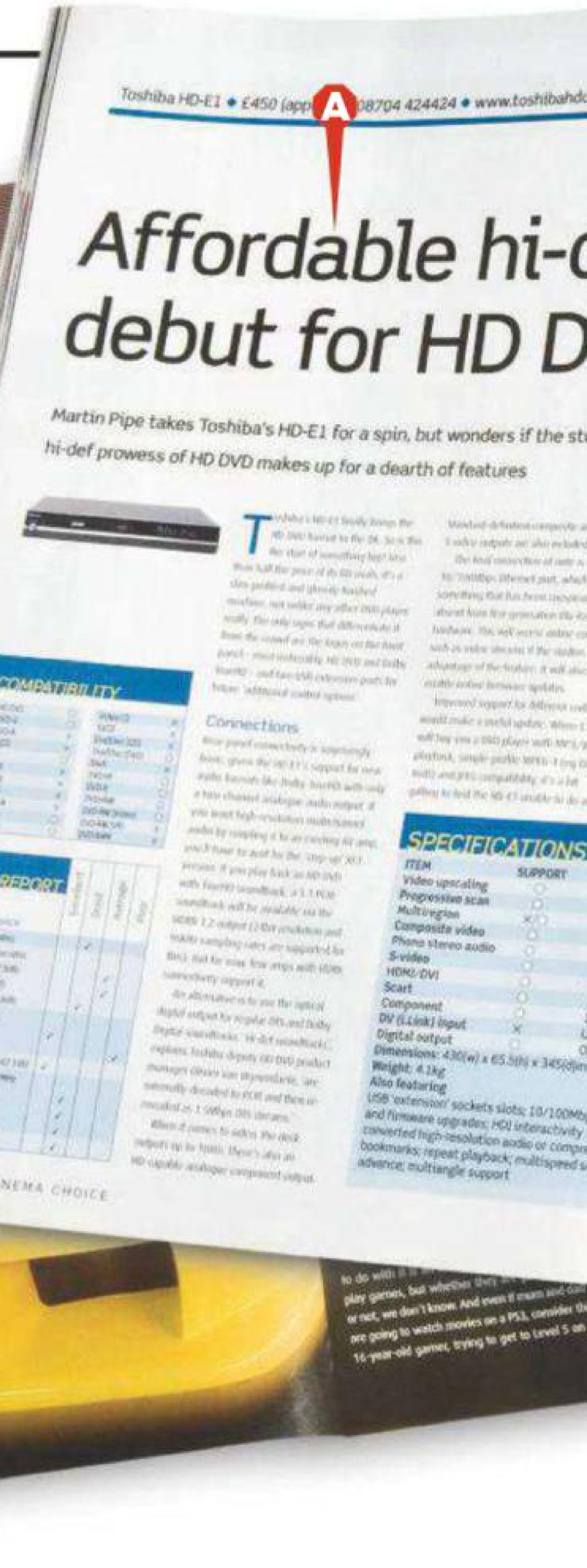
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REWIND

Mark Craven recalls the moment when the future of HD DVD seemed rosy – even if its debut standalone player in the UK lacked a few state-of-the-art features





IT'S TRICKY TO imagine now, but there was once a time when HD DVD looked like it had a future. Blu-ray, of course, triumphed in the hard-fought HD format war, but at the beginning of early 2007 its rival seemed to be a more sensible proposition. Consider this: HD DVD had more titles on offer than Blu-ray, didn't indulge in region-coding its hi-def platters, wasn't pre-occupied with launching new, consumer-confusing 'Profile' upgrades, and had hardware retailing for half the price of the cheapest standalone deck. And, yes, Blu-ray had the PlayStation 3 due to appear in a few months, but HD DVD had already countered with the cheap-as-chips Xbox 360 add-on drive. Studio support was solid, too, with Warner, Paramount Studios and Universal all pitching tent in the HD DVD camp.

Step forward six years and even the most ardent videophile has probably consigned their HD DVD player to the loft and tried to flog their copy of *The Bourne Supremacy* at a car boot sale.

Yet despite its solid start, being an HD DVD fan was always fraught with peril, and perhaps we're guilty of recalling its early days through rose-tinted glasses. It was very much a technology still finding its feet. Some of the hardware was released with curious feature omissions and with so many people willing to talk it up, from studio heads to product managers from various brands, the message was often muddied.

And there were gaffes. Mark Knox, an adviser to the HD DVD promotional group who sat down with Steve May for an interview in *HCC* #139, seemingly failed to see what everyone else thought was obvious about the imminent, Blu-ray-capable PlayStation 3:

'When you talk about the PS3, what owners are going to do with it is an unknown,' said Knox. 'Obviously they're going to play games, but whether they are going to watch movies or not, we don't know.' Sure. It's not as if people used their PS2s to play DVDs...

The second-generation game

It was in the same issue that we let Martin Pipe loose with the second-generation Toshiba HD DVD player, the HD-E1. This was actually the brand's debut HD DVD deck in the UK; the first-gen HD-A1, a much bulkier beast, had never reached our shores.

It arrived armed with a £450 price tag, ready to serve the hi-def needs of an army of movie fans eager to sample what they'd been slavishly reading about from US websites for the last six months. But when it landed, it was with more of a belly-flop than an elegant tuck.

The most notable flaw was its inability to output 1080p video, arguably the format's *raison d'etre*. By offering only 1080i, via either HDMI or component, the HD-E1 did at least cater for those with older HD Ready displays, but anyone with a Full HD TV (and there were a number around) were left short-changed.

What we said then...

A Cheap chippery
With the first BD players costing £1,000 and more, we were able to call Toshiba's £450 HD DVD deck 'affordable'

B Spin doctor
'The P in 1080p is more political than progressive,' reckoned HD DVD evangelist Mark Knox, as a way of justifying the HD-E1's 1080i output

C Timeless tech
While our cover star is now obsolete, Eclipse's Time Domain speakers are still going strong, and the current Mk3 models look almost identical to their forebears

We tested with...



Superman Returns
An early VC-1 encoded HD DVD, this Bryan Singer flick was also released on BD by Warner Home Video – and was even scheduled to be the first dual-format Total Hi Def release.

stereoguide



Fast-forward

What's up, Tosh?

The quick-fire collapse of HD DVD left Toshiba badly burnt. It had arrived at CES 2008, ready to deliver its annual press conference, when Warner announced it was switching to Blu-ray exclusivity as of June. That development effectively sealed the format's fate, and Toshiba revealed it was ceasing manufacture of HD DVD hardware a little more than a month later.

Since then, the Japanese brand has naturally entered the Blu-ray business, but with decks only coming at the lower-end of the market you could argue that its heart simply isn't in it. Rather, it's TVs where Toshiba's AV ambitions lie (as well as its hefty range of laptops, tablets and camcorders).



In this market, Toshiba has bagged a couple of scintillating firsts – its multi-tuner, multi-terabyte Cell TV (which, unfortunately, was deemed too outrageously high-end for UK buyers) and the glasses-free ZL2 TV, which was only a compatible HDMI input away from bringing 4K Blu-ray upscaling to the UK a year in advance of Sony and LG. The brand is now poised to bring 4K sets to market at 58in, 65in and 84in.

Just don't expect it to join another format war...

But at the same time, multichannel audio breakout was only possible via the HDMI v1.2 socket – analogue phonos were limited to stereo – meaning owners of legacy AVRs weren't catered for either.

Factor in a complete lack of additional file support (even bargain DVD players at the time could handle MP3 and JPEG files), plus a bland design and user interface, and the HD-E1 hardly felt like a state-of-the art slab of hardware.

It was, however, saved by its performance. 'Excellent shadow definition and image depth are coupled with a notable freedom from the digital nasties that put some Blu-ray MPEG-2 releases to shame,' noted our reviewer when the HD-E1 was partnered with a 1080i Sony 'Pearl' projector. Its sonic prowess was also praised.

Even so, our final conclusion was to wait for the forthcoming 1080p-capable HD-XE1, despite the associated price increase. With the HD-E1, Toshiba aimed low. And nearly missed ■

MASTERING THE ART OF PROJECTION

Moving from a flatscreen TV to a projector needn't be a daunting task. Bigscreen fanatic **John Archer** presents this guide to getting the best from home cinema PJs

THERE WAS A time when recreating the cinema experience at home was beyond the financial and practical ambitions of even the most eager film fan. These days, though, enjoying true bigscreen thrills in either your lounge or a dedicated room can be both startlingly affordable and easy to achieve.

Full HD projectors, able to deliver respectable pictures of 100in and more, can now be yours for under £800. And even the most basic contemporary models include features designed to make them easy to set up, wherever and whenever.

Yet while creating an Odeon in your front room might be less daunting than it used to be, getting the best performance out of a projection system still requires some effort...

Placement and zoom

There are a number of points to consider when deciding where to put your new projector. First, you need to identify the best spot for it in your chosen room. A good starting point is to consider your seating positions. You want to keep the PJ as far away as possible from where you're going to be sat, so that you won't be distracted by either fan noise or heat dissipation. Mounting the projector on the ceiling rather than on a shelf or table can obviously help in this respect, although such a permanent installation might not be suited to every environment.

If possible, we suggest you try to position the projector some distance behind your seating position, rather than in front of you. Obviously this usually means needing a high shelf or stand to put the unit on, and not sitting between it and your screen/wall. The benefit is that you aren't distracted by the physical presence of the projector and its light beam.

The only exception to this rear positioning preference is if you're using the speakers that now come built into many cheap and cheerful PJs – in this situation you don't want the sound accompanying your movies to be coming from behind you. On the other hand, you shouldn't be relying on built-in projector speakers anyway.

Once you know where the projector will be, you should work out the size of the image you want to create. Every projector has a throw ratio – the distance it needs to be from a screen or wall in order to deliver a specific size of image. The exact specifications of this come from the lens used in a particular PJ and its zoom capability. Projectors with more expansive optical zoom ranges – some go to 2x and beyond – are going to give you greater positioning flexibility. JVC's DLA-X35, for instance, can throw a 200in image anywhere from 6.06m to 12.3m metres, thanks to its 2x zoom.

When studying a projector's throw ratio specs, understand the difference between optical and digital zoom. Optical zoom enlarges the image by manipulating the lens; digital zoom enlarges the image by using processing to add extra picture information. This makes digital zoom a no-go area,

Ceiling-mounting is ideal for a long-term installation, but can make cabling and calibration tricky





since the processing involved often leaves pictures looking blocky, fuzzy, soft, or all mixture of all three.

Lens shift and keystone correction

You may find you're unable to position your projector exactly opposite the centre of your screen. This can cause problems with image geometry – but if your PJ has the right tools, they're fixable.

The most common issue is vertical offset. Most people will have to put a projector above or below (depending on whether they're ceiling-mounting

> 'Some projectors can lose their focus over time, so we recommend you recheck as often as you can'

or not) their screen. This is a problem because the angle at which the light is having to travel (up or down) from the lens will lead to the image's sides narrowing in, resulting in a trapezoid shape rather than the perfect rectangle you're after.

If you're lucky or, more honestly, if you've spent enough, your projector will have vertical optical image shifting, allowing you to move the image up or down without it losing its desired shape. If a projector you're looking at supports this, make sure the extent of vertical movement offered is enough for your needs, as some can shift their images much further than others.

If your PJ doesn't deliver vertical image shifting, you'll have to rely on a feature called keystone correction to keep image sides straight. This is not a desirable approach, since in essence it merely digitally distorts the image to correct its shape irregularities, reducing the 'pixel for pixel' accuracy and clarity of a Full HD projector.

Needless to say, if you're serious about picture quality, you should get a projector with vertical image shifting – they're available for as little as £1,000 now – and always use this feature ahead of keystone correction. If you do have a projector that doesn't offer vertical image shifting, and can't get the unit at precisely the right height to make keystone correction unnecessary, you should at least try to raise/lower the projector's position a bit to minimise the extent of keystone correction required.

Another setup tweak is horizontal image shifting. This isn't a universal feature on projectors, but it's useful to look for if your room is an awkward shape, as it allows you to set the projector to the left or right of the screen and move the image across without it losing focus or geometry.

Focusing on focus

Focus is perhaps the single biggest element of a projector's picture quality. If you don't take great care to get your projector's focus exactly right, you'll be selling your picture quality short as it will look soft and lack the maximum detail.

So important is accurate focus to image quality, in fact, that a growing number of projectors, especially at the mid-range level or higher, are including grid-based test patterns within their onscreen menus to help you get the focus perfect. Panasonic, for instance, builds a test pattern into its PT-AT6000E projector that provides small, dense clusters of horizontal and vertical lines.

If your projector doesn't have a built-in focus test screen, we'd suggest investing in a Blu-ray calibration disc like *Digital Video Essentials: HD Basics* or the more expensive but better-organised *Spears &* >

Investing in a model with horizontal/vertical lens shift – like Epson's EH-TW9100 – makes setup simpler

Munsil High Definition Benchmark Blu-ray. Pick a test screen with small text or lines on it, and it will help you get focus spot on. Failing all that, you'll just have to get close to the screen and study the text in the projector's onscreen menus.

If your projector doesn't have a focus you can adjust via its remote control, you can use the focus ring round the lens. We recommend enlisting a friend to manipulate the ring while you look closely at the image on the screen.

Some projectors (particularly, in our experience, some otherwise excellent Epson models) can lose focus over time thanks to the repeated cycle of running hot and then cooling down again. So recheck your focus as often as you can.

Room setup

How far you can go in optimising your room for projection obviously depends on what sort of space you're using. If it's a dedicated home cinema room then the sky's the limit; you can basically dress it just like your local cinema. But if it's a living room, your options are probably more limited.

The most important thing to consider is ambient light. You want as little of it present as possible while using your PJ. Whatever light there is will dilute the intensity of its images.

In a perfect world, you will have either no windows in your room, or else windows that can be covered by black-out curtains. Many made-to-order curtains these days include the option to have them backed with black-out material. Also, try and make sure your curtains are a dark colour – ideally black – and made from a material that absorbs light exceptionally well. Black velvet is particularly effective, if a little Gothic.

Also critical is the colour of your room's walls. The white or magnolia schemes so many people use in their living rooms are a disaster zone for projection; they reflect back light that's bounced off your screen, giving more for your projection beam to compete with. This will reduce the image's intensity.

A drastic solution would be to paint walls a dark colour. This doesn't have to be black if you find that too oppressive; we've found stone or dove grey to be very effective too. But the darker you can bear to go, the better the results should be. Also, make sure you use matt paint, not eggshell or – shudder – gloss.

Another option is to tack over your walls a material similar to that used for your curtains. Or you could use black felt, or even rolls of black paper if you want a more affordable (but less attractive) option.

You don't have to cover your entire room in black if you don't want to, though. You can leave the wall behind the screen clear, and keep your light-absorbent wall covering to around two to three metres in front of the screen, and still achieve a reduction in unwanted ambient light.

When we're talking about walls here we're also including your ceiling. A white ceiling above a projector screen can often create more distracting ambient light than all the walls put together.

Lastly: if possible, keep highly reflective bits of furniture – such as glass-fronted cupboards or glass-topped tables – sufficiently far away from your screen so they don't create bright reflections.

Calibration

Although many manufacturers have got better at shipping projectors with good picture presets (they're usually better than TVs in this respect), a little tinkering with your model's various picture tools can often yield a clear picture improvement.

The goal of your tinkering can take two forms. One is to try to get your pictures as close as possible to the established industry standards for HD video. >



Room décor can impact upon your projector's images – go for dark walls wherever possible

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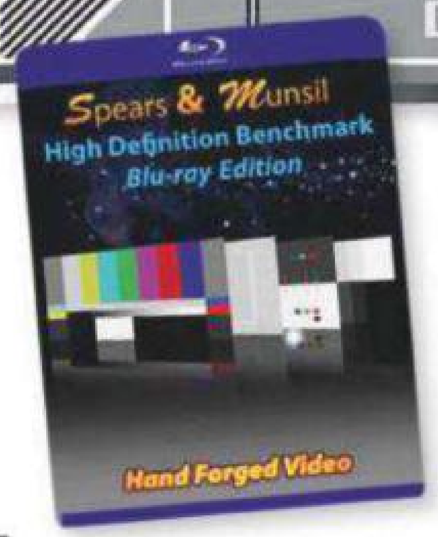
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If you can't afford to have your projector calibrated by a professional, test discs and test cards can help you adjust picture settings yourself

Some would argue that this is the only approach to take, but this argument can ignore the actual capabilities of some hardware, especially at the cheaper end of the market. We'd counter that sometimes you get more enjoyable results if you calibrate a PJ to getting the best out its own individual optical system.

If your projector is certified by the Imaging Science Foundation (ISF) and you've got £200-£350 spare, then grab an ISF calibrator to set your projector up for you. The beauty of this approach – aside from you not having to do anything yourself – is that the engineer takes account of the specific requirements of your cinema environment as well as keeping an eye on established video standards. If you'd rather have a go at your own calibration, though, there are a some general rules that should serve you well.

First, if you've managed to get your room good and dark, make sure your projector is running in its Eco or Low lamp mode (if it has one). As well as reducing fan noise and power consumption, we almost always find that running the lamp at a reduced output level produces more nuanced and less 'overblown' colours – especially on budget projectors – as well as boosting black level response.

With this in mind, even if you can't be bothered to calibrate most aspects of your projector's performance, at least play with the tools available for boosting black level. If your projector has a dynamic contrast or dynamic iris system – or both – experiment with them while watching a very dark film sequence, such as Chapter 12 of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, Part 2*.

What you're trying to achieve is the deepest black colour you can – minimising the sort of 'grey mist' that hangs over low-contrast images – while also keeping a lid on the potentially distracting jumps in the image's brightness that dynamic iris/contrast adjustments can cause as they respond to changes in the image content. These brightness jumps can be far more distracting than having slightly washed-out blacks, so you'll ultimately be looking for the dynamic contrast/iris setting which delivers the best balance between stability and black level response. Don't just focus alone on getting the deepest shades.

The other key controls for influencing black level are a projector's contrast and brightness settings. When adjusting these, a static PLUGE test signal (which shows varying degrees of black and grey) is ideal. If you don't have one of the calibration Blu-ray aids mentioned earlier, pausing on a dark movie shot is your next best option.

Again, you're not just trying to get the inkiest blacks possible. Rather, you're trying to achieve the most satisfying balance between deep blacks and enough brightness to a) still leave images with a bit of punch and b) deliver enough shadow detail in dark scenes to stop them looking hollow and flat.

Colour matters

Regarding colours, this is the most difficult area to tackle yourself, even if you've gone to the trouble of getting a calibration disc with test signals. The amount of colour adjustment tools provided differs wildly between projectors, too.

Make sure colours aren't so oversaturated that they 'blow out' subtle gradations. A colour blend test pattern will be especially helpful here, but paused HD pictures of faces and rich animated content are also useful. If colours look short of subtle gradations, try reducing your PJ's overall colour saturation level. Or if just one colour looks short of fine gradations, tweak the saturations of that colour alone if your projector lets you. It's quite common for projectors to push some colours more aggressively than others – for instance, LCD projectors traditionally struggle to produce reds with as much punch as other hues. If you notice some colours leaping out at you more than others when using a colour bar test signal or during a particular video sequence, you again need to try reducing the dominance of that particular colour.

Where colour is concerned, there's the issue of naturalism. Some projectors ship with their colours set to very rich, aggressive levels which might be eye-catching but ultimately don't look at all credible. Simply toning down the overall colour saturation can help, as can adjusting the colour temperature (use the 6500K setting if your projector has one). Also worth tinkering with is the Gamma setting. Here, 2.2 is usually best for video viewing in a dark room, so if your PJ has that setting, use it.

If you have a colour meter, you can use this to measure your projector's colour performance, and

thus tweak colours to levels in line with industry standards. This won't be an option for the vast majority of normal people, though, so you'll basically have to experiment until colours look the most natural to your own eye. Focus especially on skin tones and deep reds and greens..

Many projectors include processing elements for improving sharpness, colour saturations, and motion fluidity. For the most part we recommend that you avoid them, as they make pictures look horrific. For instance, over-sharpening pictures can introduce unwanted noise and haloing effects. Colour boosters can exaggerate noise and make tones over-cooked. And motion compensation systems can make film content look like made-for-TV video, not an effect similar to what you currently get at the cinema (unless you saw *The Hobbit* at 48fps...).

Don't forget your screen!

If you really want to get the best out of a projector, you need to aim it at a proper screen.

Many casual users save money and make do with a white wall, yet the reflective properties of a simple painted wall won't do your picture quality any favours at all – and the lack of any 'frame' to wall-projected images also reduces the sense of contrast in the image, as well as looking, well, not much like a cinema at all.

If you really can't face installing a screen, you can get paints specially designed for projection use – such as the Mighty Brighty projection screen paint kit available from www.cyberselect.co.uk. But investing in a screen is best – and they don't have to cost a fortune by any means.

The main thing to consider with a screen in picture quality terms is gain: the extent to which a screen 'amplifies' the light hitting it from a projector. If you watch in a dark room, a simple neutral or small gain white screen usually gets the job done perfectly well, minimising the issues with light pollution and colour shifting you can get with high gain screens. The latter are generally only worthwhile if you often find yourself using a projector in a fairly light environment.

If you're really obsessed with black levels, or your room has light walls, you could consider getting a grey rather than white screen. However, these can compromise the appearance of some bright colours, and in our opinion only truly suit a very small number of household installations.

Other things to consider here are your screen's acoustic properties and aspect ratio. If you want to top off your home cinema experience with speakers located behind the screen, you'll want a fabric that doesn't compromise the quality of the audio – plenty of manufacturers offer acoustically transparent screens containing tiny perforations designed to let sound through. Such screens can suffer slightly compromised reflective properties, though, and we've also seen instances where the combination of the screen weave and perforations can lead to moire noise over areas of fine detail – especially with HD. If possible, test an acoustically transparent screen with your preferred model of projector before handing over any cash.

Regarding aspect ratios, serious movie fans might want to consider getting a screen with a CinemaScope 2.35:1 aspect ratio rather than the standard 16:9 iteration. With plenty of films made in the wider format, it's great to be able to watch without the usual black bars above and below the picture. If this appeals, though, note that you'll also need an (often expensive) anamorphic lens attachment for your projector – if your projector even supports such a thing – to make the most out of CinemaScope screens. Alternatively, there are one or two projectors, like the Panasonic PT-AT6000E, which have built-in lens adjustment features, for switching between 2.35:1 and standard 16:9 playback (by adjusting zoom and focus). Or you could manually adjust your projector's settings every time you watch a film in a different ratio, or fork out for an automated masking system. Or stick with 16:9 and learn to love those black bars... ■



There is a multitude of projector screens available, including high-end ceiling-hung options like Screen Innovations' Black Diamond

HDMI ALL THE WAY

Hooking up your projector is remarkably fuss-free



Connecting a projector is these days quite straightforward. The main advice is simply this: wherever possible, use an HDMI connection to hook up your source equipment. These digital connections deliver the cleanest, sharpest, most accurate pictures from Blu-ray players, DVD players, games consoles and AVRs.

You could at a push use a component video input for HD sources instead, but the results won't be as detailed (the max resolution is 1080i). And in any case, can you think of a modern source that offers component outputs without HDMI ones? Other main video connections – composite and S-Video – can't deliver an HD picture and should be avoided.

One's enough

If all your sources are running through an AVR, a single HDMI input on the PJ will suffice. Many now offer two, though – handy for quickly adding 'guest' hardware.

Haters of cables and those that don't like the idea of a long run between source and projector can invest in a Wireless HD transmission system to 'beam' video signals from a transmitter attached to your source to a receiver attached to your projector (such as the DVDO Air, pictured), but this still requires cabling – and power sockets.

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DIY vs Dealer?

Selecting and installing home cinema on a DIY basis may leave the system performing at way below its optimum level.

Choosing a home cinema system is a potential minefield that must be negotiated with great care or safely avoided by letting experts guide you. If you want to end up with a system that, as a minimum, meets your expectations in terms of picture and sound quality, reading magazine product reviews and choosing the recommendations, five-star favourites or best buys can only ever be part of the answer at best. Looking for the cheapest price and having a system delivered to your door, even with a 'knowledgeable' friend to help set it up, is a well-trodden path to disappointment.

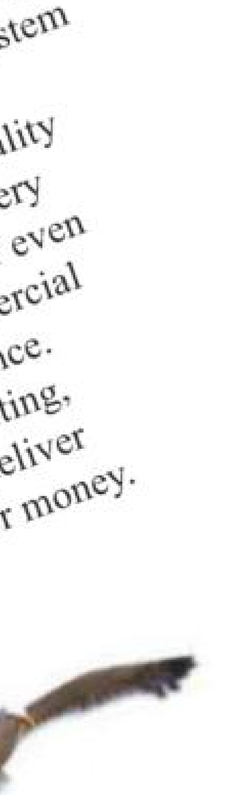
There is a bewildering choice of components on the market today and also different ways in which components can be installed and connected together. Which sort of visual system do you go for? Projector and screen, or plasma, LCD or LED TV? 3D or non-3D?

Full 1080p capability is now the only sensible choice but the appropriate source components, such as a Blu-ray player, need to be part of the equation. The sound performance of a system is also hugely important, even more so if you will be listening to music, or music DVD's, through the same system. If so, you need an amp that approaches the performance of a decent 2-channel hi-fi amp, which is not that easy to find. Having an amp with the right inputs for the best connectivity is essential but you will also need to decide on a 5.1 or 7.1 speaker system, passive or active sub and, crucially, where they will be sited for the best results. In short, it's complicated and very fertile ground for getting it wrong.

Achieving potential

To select a system, you could choose a collection of 'Best Buy' components in the hope that they will be a great combination. Maybe, but probably not. You could buy a pre-packaged all-in-one system from one manufacturer. This is almost certainly not the best route either, as you will miss out on enormous potential. From informal surveys conducted, it appears highly likely that the majority of home cinema systems selected and installed on a DIY basis (that is without professional input) are performing at way below their optimum level. To compound matters, most are also ill-matched to the room in which they are installed and are, in reality, the wrong system. Without considerable knowledge or experience, high quality home cinema is not a suitable DIY activity. Our aim must be to buy a home cinema system that will provide an excellent picture quality plus an audio delivery that will match, or even better, the commercial cinema experience. It must be exciting, reliable and deliver true value for money.





> "Our aim must be to buy a home cinema system that will provide an excellent picture quality, plus an audio delivery that will match, or even better, the commercial cinema experience."

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TOP 20 UK
SPECIALIST HOME ENTERTAINMENT DEALERS
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What and Where to buy

To ensure a home cinema system is right for you, where do you start? Here's an important tip …don't start with WHAT, start with WHERE. There's only one way to give yourself the best chance of getting it right first time, and that's through a specialist AV dealer. It's possible you have preconceived ideas that put you off visiting one. Although you would welcome the advice and guidance, you don't know the technical jargon. You don't want to be talked down to. Your friend has said they only sell expensive gear and they're not interested if you don't have a big budget. They're expensive. These are just myths.

Most specialist AV dealers are running their business because, above all, home cinema is their hobby. They spend a large portion of their time comparing systems to get the best possible results. They know the component combinations which don't gel together and, conversely, they know the combinations which give the best performance within a given price range. Very importantly, they know how to get a system working to its optimum. But they all also know the system must suit you.

Buying or being sold to?

There are dealers around, web based or otherwise, who will sell you anything you are willing to pay for. They may be a bit cheaper but that's all they offer. Now there's a carefully selected group of long-established specialist dealers who are totally committed to putting the customer first. Their idea of 'selling' is to discuss your requirements, offer their advice, give you the best options, then play the systems for you and allow you to be the judge. You'll probably be surprised and, almost certainly, relieved to discover how easy it is to see and hear the differences between components and between systems. You'll be able to make a clear and informed decision about what to buy.

"Home cinema so good you'll believe you're there!"

The story doesn't end there. These shops won't abandon you once you've put your hand in your pocket. They won't leave you to set up the system you've selected as best you can. They'll install it in your home, make sure it performs to its best, and ensure you're entirely happy with the way it works. Why? Because a high proportion of these dealers' custom comes through people who have bought from them before, either directly or by recommendation. It's vital to them to get it right for you.

Getting the best deal

Unless you've got money to burn, you'll be living with your new system for years. Most of these dealers offer much longer equipment guarantees than provided by the manufacturer, a very worthwhile benefit, but it also makes it in the dealer's interest to ensure high build quality and reliability. Maybe you could save a few pounds by buying piecemeal but you'll lose out on the overall package. As far as the dealers are concerned, they believe that taking care of their customers properly is a far better way of doing business than just handing over boxes.

The Dealers listed below have been selected because they are known to do an excellent job in guiding customers towards home cinema systems that will provide years of superlative performance and total satisfaction.

Our top 20 AV shops in the country

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AUDIO VENUE
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www.audiovenue.com

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Southend-on-Sea
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www.rayleighhifi.com

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KENT HOME CINEMA
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01892 535007
www.kenthomecinema.co.uk

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PLAYBACK

→SOFTWARE HIGHLIGHTS **ARGO** Truth is stranger than fiction in Ben Affleck's award-winning thriller **TAKEN 2** Action sequel finds Liam Neeson doing what he does best **SIGHTSEERS** Caravanning killers pay a visit to your home cinema **SAVAGES** Pot dealers confront natural born killers in Oliver Stone's latest **FROM BEYOND** 1980s cult horror hit gets an HD makeover **AND MUCH MORE!**

Premium Bond

Skyfall → 20th Century Fox → Region B BD

Daniel Craig's third outing as bigscreen super-spy 007 set new records at the UK box office last year. But does *Skyfall* also have a licence to thrill on Blu-ray? Turn to p98 to see whether the series' latest hi-def platter will leave AV fans shaken and stirred – and if we have any more puns.



HCC RATINGS KEY...

Outstanding	★★★★★
Above average	★★★★☆
Acceptable	★★★☆☆
Disappointing	★★☆☆☆
Dire	★☆☆☆☆



'I swear I'm not the same Ben Affleck who made *Gigli* and *Pearl Harbor*. He didn't have a beard!'



Tinseltown comes to the rescue

Award-winning film shows how Hollywood helped the CIA during the 1979 Iranian hostage crisis

→ Argo

In November 1979, the US embassy in Tehran was overrun by a pro-Ayatollah force that took the personnel hostage. While the world watched the crisis unfold, what nobody outside of the US government knew was that six officials had managed to escape and were holed up in secret at the Canadian ambassador's residence.

The question of how to smuggle them safely out of Iran was answered by CIA 'exfil' specialist Tony Mendez. Together with the help of some contacts in Hollywood (including *Planet of the Apes* make-up artist John Chambers), Mendez concocted a crazy plan that would see him masquerading as a producer and establishing the hidden officials as his Canadian film crew while scouting possible locations in Iran for a fake sci-fi movie called *Argo*.

It's easy to be cynical and say that the real reason Hollywood has taken *Argo* to its heart and showered it with awards is because it shows the film industry doing some good in the world. However, that would do a serious disservice to director/star Ben Affleck and writer Chris Terrio – and completely overlook the fact that the duo has used the material to craft a tense and witty film that utterly convinces (no matter how ludicrous the story may seem). The ensemble cast is excellent and the recreation of the era is painstaking. Brilliant.

Picture: Affleck's desire to make his film look just as much a part of the late '70s as the events it depicts reaches as far as the use of the old 'triple slash' Warner Bros. logo and the dense layer of film grain that continually swarms the screen.

The fact that this Blu-ray release handles this particular element of the image so deftly is just one of the many strengths of the film's 2.40:1-framed 1080p AVC encode. Other plus points include its accuracy in recreating the deliberately desaturated colour palette, the satisfying black levels and clean delineation.

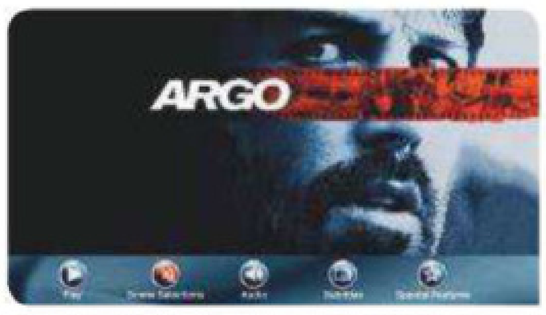
So, even if the overall effect is an image that is more subdued than something like *Skyfall*, you've got to admit that it's an accurate recreation of how *Argo* looked when it played at cinemas.

Audio: Heavy on dialogue, *Argo* isn't necessarily the sort of movie that lends itself to explosive surround sound action, but we were pleasantly surprised by the effectiveness of the Blu-ray's DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix. Scenes with angry crowds protesting on the streets surge with aggressive use of the rear channels; bass-heavy rotors will have you cowering for cover with the escaped officials. When it needs to be, it's stirring stuff, while the tight script is well-delivered.

Extras: This Blu-ray packs in plenty of goodies – not least a new 130-minute 'Extended Cut' alongside the original 122-minute theatrical release.

Also on offer are an excellent picture-in-picture track featuring commentary from many of those involved in the real event, an audio commentary by the filmmakers, three featurettes (two about the making of *Argo* and one that works likes a condensed version of the picture-in-picture video) and a 47-minute 2005 TV documentary.





HCC Verdict

Argo
→ Warner Home Video
→ All-region BD → £25 Approx
WE SAY: This excellent thriller comes to Blu-ray with strong AV credentials and fascinating bonus features

Movie	★★★★½
Picture	★★★★☆
Audio	★★★★☆
Extras	★★★★☆
Overall	★★★★½

Premium Rush

Sony Pictures → All-region BD
£22 Approx



Joseph Gordon-Levitt and Michael Shannon star in this flashy action flick about a New York cycle courier and the corrupt cop who is trying to stop him from delivering his latest package. With the unavoidable whiff of *BMX Bandits* hanging around, it's hard to take *Premium Rush* particularly seriously. But seeing as the leads clearly weren't taking it all that seriously either, it's not as if this is really a problem. It doesn't hurt that the film looks and sounds solid on Blu-ray courtesy of this platter's flawless AVC 2.40:1 visuals and exaggerated DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix. A daft but enjoyable ride.

★★★☆☆

Killing Them Softly

Entertainment in Video → Region B BD
£25 Approx

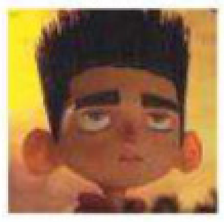


Brad Pitt plays against type as a mob hit man in this darkly comic and very violent neo-noir thriller-cum-political-allegory from the director of *The Assassination of Jesse James*. Despite updating the action to play against the 2008 US presidential election, the film remains most squarely rooted in '70s cinema – a fact reflected in this disc's dark and grainy AVC 2.40:1 1080p imagery. Much of the DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix is given over to dialogue, but it also knows when to cut loose (such as the bone-crunching blows during Markie's beating). Seven short interviews are the only extras.

★★★★☆

ParaNorman 3D

Universal Pictures → All-region BD
£28 Approx



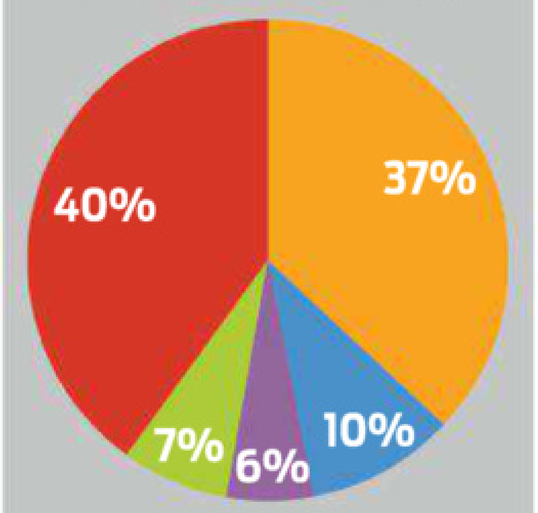
A young boy with the ability to talk to the dead finds himself battling zombies and a witch's curse in this 3D stop-motion film. While *ParaNorman* is frequently funny, beautifully animated and shows a real love for the horror genre, it also lacks that spark of life that marks out a truly great 'toon. And, while the film looks excellent when presented 'flat', the 3D incarnation of the disc's MVC 2.40:1 1080p encode is rather more hit-and-miss due to the dark nature of the visuals. Otherwise, the disc scores pretty well with a boisterous DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix and plenty of behind-the-scenes extras.

★★★½☆

We asked...

Which actor is the best of the 'official' bigscreen James Bonds?

Sean Connery
Roger Moore
Timothy Dalton
Pierce Brosnan
Daniel Craig



Results from www.homecinemachoice.com
Go online for more polling action



Neeson's Turkish delight

Over-protective dad Bryan Mills is back kicking euro-trash butt in this slick sequel

→ Taken 2

When *Taken* blew up the box office in 2008, a sequel was inevitable. Thankfully, writing duo Luc Besson and Robert Mark Kamen have at least attempted to rework the hard-man-rescuing-his-daughter theme by giving a bigger role to sprog Kim (Maggie Grace) and having black ops master Bryan Mills (Liam Neeson) himself the victim of a kidnapping. The result is an enjoyable throwaway slice of popcorn fisticuffs, held together by Neeson's performance and some well-crafted set-pieces.

Much was made by critics of the toned-down violence in director Olivier Megaton's sequel – but the director's quick-cut editing style (as seen in *Transporter 3*) is partly to blame here. And, thankfully, this Blu-ray release from Fox features an 'Extended Harder Cut' which does put some of the power back into the punches.

Not a patch on the original, but worth a viewing.





Picture: Fox's 1080p AVC encode is reminiscent of the movie itself – slick, efficient but somewhat forgettable. Megaton's 2.35:1 image drinks in the stone-clad exteriors of Istanbul's maze of streets and the murky interiors of the bad guys' lair, but the overall colour palette is hardly an advert for the Eastern Mediterranean's sunny climes. Detail levels are high despite a quite heavy layer of grain, and the frequent dark sequences generally hold plenty of shadowy information. The best part of *Taken 2*'s BD HD presentation is that the image seems completely unmolested by sharpening tools.

Audio: Fox's disc brandishes a DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix that's full of the usual highlights – clean dialogue, bass-laden punches and gunfire and use of the rear surrounds to envelop the audience. However, the nature of the action never gives it a chance to cut loose (unlike Neeson's recent *Battleship*), nor is there much inventiveness here. Like Bryan Mills, it's direct and to the point.

Extras: The menu gives you the choice of theatrical or extended cuts, and you'll need to select the latter to gain access to the *Black Ops Field Manual* pop-up trivia track. Elsewhere, extras consist of other Fox title trailers, *Taken 2*'s own trailer, deleted scenes, *Sam's Tools of The Trade* (a pointless look at what's inside a CIA man's suitcase) and an alternate ending which would benefit from seamless branching. Oddly, some short extras from the US disc, including an interview with Neeson, are AWOL.

HCC Verdict

Taken 2: Extended Harder Cut
→ 20th Century Fox
→ All-region BD → £25 Approx
WE SAY: A decent but not outstanding disc for this competent action sequel

Movie ★★★½☆
Picture ★★★★☆
Audio ★★★½☆
Extras ★★½☆☆
Overall ★★★☆☆

The sky's the limit in 007's latest

Blockbuster franchise hits new heights as James Bond celebrates 50 years of movie action



→ Skyfall

When James Bond's latest mission goes awry, M finds herself under threat from forces both at home (an inquiry into her role in the mission's failure) and abroad (a mysterious terrorist with a personal vendetta) in this 23rd outing in the continuing adventures of Britain's favourite secret agent.

After following the brilliant *Casino Royale* with the lacklustre *Quantum of Solace*, the franchise owners clearly needed to do something very special for Daniel Craig's third outing as 007 – especially as it was being released in conjunction with the series' 50th anniversary.

Thankfully, what they've cooked up is a great addition to the Bond franchise – both a celebration and reinvention of elements from the past, and a modern tale that points towards any number of exciting futures for the character.

Is the highest-grossing Bond film ever also the best of the lot? Well, that's arguable. But it's still a supremely thrilling slice of spy action that will unquestionably stand the test of time much better than many of its predecessors. Yes, *Octopussy*, we're looking at you...

Picture: From the moment that 007 steps up to the camera in *Skyfall*'s opening shot – with a shaft of light carefully picking out each eyelash and wrinkle on Daniel Craig's face – it's clear that this Blu-ray encode has a licence to thrill.

Yet the AVC 2.40:1 1080p encode on Fox/MGM's hi-def platter doesn't only dazzle when it comes to its sophisticated fine detailing. Colour reproduction is impressive, with primaries looking incredibly vibrant and vivid – especially when they're contrasted with the image's clandestine inky blacks, such as Bond's arrival at the lantern-lit casino in Chapter 14.

Clarity and delineation is also first-rate, as evidenced by 007's fight with the assassin Patrice in Chapter 12. The silhouettes of the two combatants are suitably crisp as they're framed against the gaudy LED advertising playing out on the skyscraper behind them

While shot digitally, *Skyfall* avoids any artificial sheen and looks 'filmic' throughout. Make no mistake about it – *Skyfall*'s AVC encode is a stunner. You'll be using this disc to showcase your setup for some time to come.







Daniel Craig insisted on doing *Skyfall*'s train-top fight sequence himself



Audio: While not offering the wall-to-wall action of some of the Brosnan-era Bond films, *Skyfall* delivers an awesome DTS-HD Master Audio 5.1 mix that befits its blockbuster intentions.

Things get off to a spectacular start, with the movie's rooftop motorcycle chase and train shoot-out providing a wealth of bombastic surround sound effects and impactful bass. But even when the narrative settles down a bit, the mix still impresses with the expansive and 'lived-in' feeling that it gives to the film's various locations.

Dialogue is equally well-presented, with just as much clarity and precision as the more spectacular action sequences. The handling of Thomas Newman's soaring score is terrific in its tonal range and careful inflection, providing the final icing to this Blu-ray cake.

Extras: There are enough bonus features here to keep Bond-hedz happy while waiting for the next instalment in the franchise.

Director Sam Mendes sits down by himself for the first of two commentary tracks, providing a detailed and informative account of the film's production, and being quite honest in his thoughts as a filmmaker: of the Komodo dragon scene he says, 'That was not something I'd done before, which is stage a sequence around a computer-generated animal... And it made me... How can I say this? Not want to do blue-screen pictures.'

Producers Barbara Broccoli and Michael G. Wilson are joined by production designer Dennis Gassner for the other commentary. This track doesn't flow quite as freely, but it still finds time to address some questions surrounding the production ('It's not a shotgun, it's a .50 caliber hunting rifle. Huge difference,' says Wilson – seemingly in response to one of the criticisms from our own Richard Stevenson in his column in *HCC* #216).

The other major extra is *Shooting Bond*, a 14-part look at the making of the movie that runs for just short of an hour. As you can probably guess from that running time, we're not talking about a massively in-depth affair. However, it still covers most of the pertinent areas that you'd hope to see discussed (*Opening Sequence*, *Villains*, *Action*, etc); is packed with interviews and behind-the-scenes footage; and serves up some amusing anecdotes (such as director of photography Roger Deakins recounting how the downdraft from a helicopter blew the false teeth out of Javier Bardem's mouth during the shooting of one scene).

Rounding things off are red carpet interviews from the film's London premiere, the theatrical trailer and a promo spot for the soundtrack album. The Blu-ray also ships with a DVD and Digital Copy. >

HCC Verdict

Skyfall

→ MGM/20th Century Fox → Region B BD/R2 DVD → £25 Approx

WE SAY: The biggest Bond film ever delivers a sensational home cinema experience on Blu-ray. Unmissable

Movie	★★★★½
Picture	★★★★★
Audio	★★★★★
Extras	★★★
Overall	★★★★½

Demo Screen...

Skyfall

Time code: 097.04 – 098.44



Going underground: Following a dangerous chase through the London Underground, Bond finally catches up with sadistic terrorist Silva and lets him know it with a warning shot.



Push the button: But a resourceful chap like Silva always has a back-up plan for situations like this. And here, all it takes is the push of a single button to turn the tables on 007 yet again...



Kiss kiss bang bang: As an almighty explosion rips through the tunnel, the Blu-ray's DTS-HD Master Audio 5.1 soundtrack gets to deliver a serious thump of LFE.



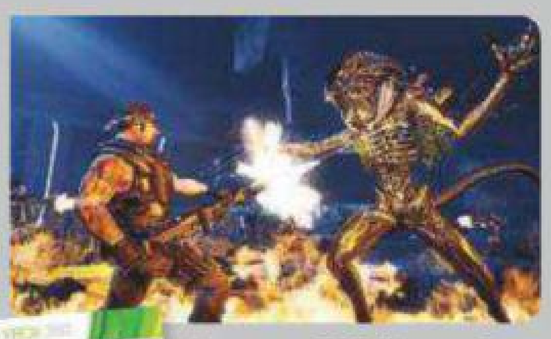
Mind the gap: The next part of the plan involves Silva attempting to drop a Tube train on Bond's head – here, the entire 5.1 soundstage explodes into action as the train hurtles into the tunnel.

Arcade Action

Bigscreen home entertainment isn't just about movies anymore. Check out these two videogames vying for time on your home cinema system...

Aliens: Colonial Marines

SEGA → Xbox 360/PS3/Wii U/PC → £50 Approx



Few films have had quite as big an impact on videogame design as *Alien* and *Aliens*. The influence of H.R. Giger's xenomorphs and James Cameron's gung-ho space marines can be found everywhere from '80s shooter *R-Type* to the rather more recent *Gears of War*.



However, SEGA's new first-person shooter arrives bearing the full weight of the official *Aliens* licence and promises a terrifying adventure set within the continuity of the movies. Set after the events of *Alien*³, the game gives you control of one of a squad of Colonial Marines who have been sent to investigate the wreck of the *U.S.S. Sulaco*, which has mysteriously reappeared in orbit of LV-426. Naturally, it isn't long before everything goes to hell as you come up against xenomorphs and mercenaries in the employ of Weyland-Yutani.

All of which sounds pretty cool. But given its lengthy and troubled production history, *Aliens: Colonial Marines* has emerged feeling like a game that simply can't keep up with its contemporaries. Graphical textures are muddy and elements such as the motion tracker have been better implemented in games that simply ripped-off the films. Worst of all, though, is the way in which the franchise's iconic xenomorphs have been completely de-fanged and turned into nothing more than moving targets incapable of actually killing anyone.

★★½☆☆

Ni No Kuni: Wrath of the White Witch

Namco Bandai → PS3 → £50 Approx



Outside of the ubiquitous *Final Fantasy* series, there are very few Japanese role-playing games that have ever managed to find mainstream success in the West. But Namco Bandai's latest has done just that – thanks largely to the game's connections to the legendary Japanese animation powerhouse Studio Ghibli, who co-developed *Ni No Kuni...* with RPG specialist Level-5 (creators of the phenomenally popular *Professor Layton* handheld games).



Indeed, with its narrative about an orphaned child guided through a parallel universe and countless gorgeously animated cut-scenes, the early part of the game feels at lot like sitting through a brand new Studio Ghibli movie – albeit one that requires you to press 'X' on your DualShock controller every so often. But once the game has brought you up to speed with the *Pokémon*-esque nature of its combat mechanics (there are hundreds of wild creatures for you to tame and battle with) *Ni No Kuni...* reveals itself to be a much richer and more versatile gaming experience that you might have initially expected. And with Studio Ghibli involved, it's hardly surprising that it's also looks and sounds spectacular. The animation is flawless and packed with character, while the script localisation is some of the best (and funniest) we've ever encountered in an RPG.

★★★★½

Everything or Nothing

20th Century Fox → R2 DVD
£15 Approx



While it never really lives up to its subtitle of being 'The Untold Story of 007', this official look at the history of one of cinema's most enduring franchises is no mere hagiography. Instead, it's a surprisingly unvarnished account of the trials and tribulations faced in bringing the films to the bigscreen – and is packed with interviews with almost all of the key players (Sean Connery is, unsurprisingly, the most obvious absentee). Think of it as a very informative DVD addendum to last year's *Bond 50* BD boxset.

★★★½☆

Room 237

Metrodome → R2 DVD
£17 Approx



This enjoyable documentary gives a bunch of nutters the chance to explain the hidden meanings they claim to have found in Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining*. The result is a mix of the intriguing (possibly deliberate continuity mistakes) and the insane (it's really a hidden message from Kubrick explaining how he was responsible for faking the moon-landing footage) – and if nothing else it leaves you wanting to watch *The Shining* again. The anamorphic 1.78:1 picture and DD 5.1 audio are both fine, if limited by the quality of the varied source material.

★★★☆☆

Doctor Who: The Aztecs – Special Edition

BBC Worldwide → R2 DVD
£20 Approx



Yet another previously released *Doctor Who* benefits from a second DVD outing – including improved picture quality and even more bonus features. However, the major selling point for this two-disc set is the inclusion of a 64-minute reconstruction of the missing 1965 serial *Galaxy 4*, the centrepiece of which is a pristine restoration of the recently rediscovered third episode (pictured). It's still a dreadful story, but the chance to finally see how bad it was for yourself makes this set a must-own for fans.

★★★★☆

Storemags



It's really hard to get caravanners to stop talking – but, then, they do like to ramble...

'Everybody has a Summer holiday...

...Doin' things they always wanted to,' sang Cliff Richards. We doubt this is what he had in mind

→ Sightseers



When Chris (Steve Oram) takes his new girlfriend Tina (Alice Lowe) on a caravanning holiday, what was initially planned as an 'erotic odyssey' through Yorkshire soon turns into a murderous rampage.

Part *Nuts in May*, part *Badlands*, director Ben Wheatley's third film after *Down Terrace* and *Kill List* is an absolute triumph. Written by its two leads, this black comedy has the confidence to mix sharp humour ('He's not a person, Tina. He's a *Daily Mail* reader') with daft sight gags (Tina trying to write a heartfelt letter to Chris with a gigantic novelty pencil) and somehow balances the two aspects perfectly. Add to that some lashings of brutal violence and what's not to love?

Picture: Visually *Sightseers* is very much akin to Ben Wheatley's previous films. As such, it regularly opts for a more naturalistic look borne out of the film's digital photography.

On the downside this sometimes makes the AVC 2.40:1 1080p encode appear rather drab, thanks to some pallid skintones and washed-out black levels. But it also ensures that there's plenty of detail in the photography that gives the image a real sense of depth. And taken together it often results in some truly striking visuals, such as the sight of Chris stalking a victim through the dawn mist in Chapter 4.

Audio: The disc offers a choice of a DTS-HD MA 5.1 soundtrack and an LPCM 2.0 downmix, and while the multichannel mix represents the film's original sound design, no one will be shocked to hear that *Sightseers* isn't going to push your speaker setup particularly hard.

Most of the mix is focused on the front of the soundstage and the quality is very good. Dialogue sounds natural and there's a heft to the thuds of stone and wood on skin and bone during the murder scenes.

While rear activity is primarily limited to subtle atmospherics, the mix does open up on occasion to give some scenes a more dynamic feel. Examples include the cars racing to get the last camping spot in Dingley Dell in Chapter 3 and the wind and hail battering the caravan during Chapter 10's storm.

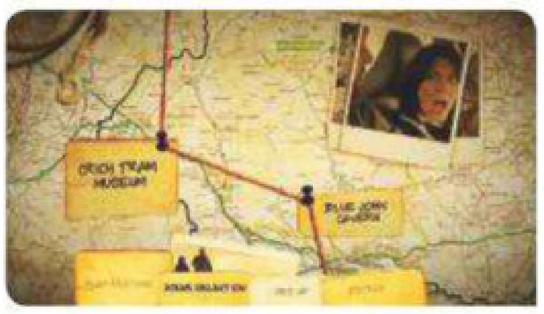
Extras: StudioCanal's Blu-ray presents holiday-makers with a modest but informative selection of extra features that do a thorough job of exploring the film's background and production.

Ben Wheatley joins actors Alice Lowe, Steve Oram and Richard Glover for the first of two audio commentaries included on the disc. For those of you who find this track a bit too jokey and flippant, Wheatley also sits down with director of photography Laurie Rose for a more technical chat-track.

The Blu-ray also includes an amusing 36-minute behind-the-scenes featurette (worth watching just to see the typically dreary British weather the cast and crew had to deal with while shooting in the middle of nowhere), 12 minutes of outtakes and a pair of theatrical trailers.



Forget sun, sea and sand. Here in the UK we offer clouds, rain and dead animals



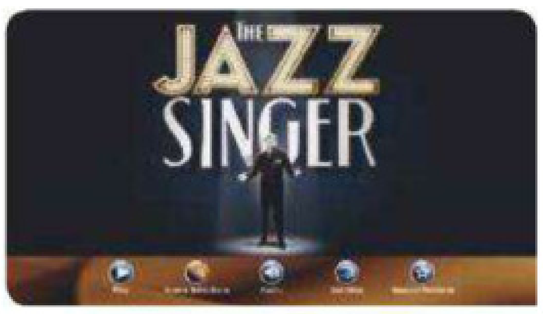
HCC Verdict

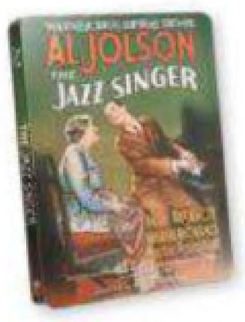
Sightseers
→ StudioCanal
→ Region B BD → £23 Approx
WE SAY: This attractive package should help Ben Wheatley's black comedy make a killing on Blu-ray

Movie ★★★★½
Picture ★★★★
Audio ★★★
Extras ★★★
Overall ★★★★

Remembering the Golden Years...

Warner's classic Blu-ray steelbooks deserve a place in every self-respecting film fan's collection



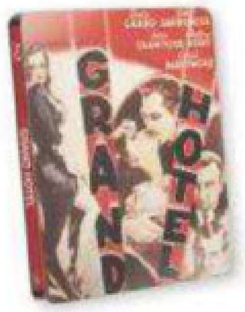




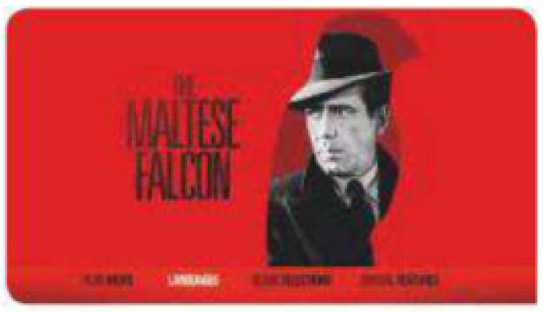


The Jazz Singer (above) was the first feature-length movie to include synchronised dialogue and singing

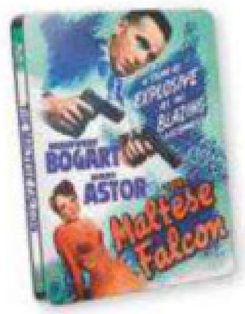




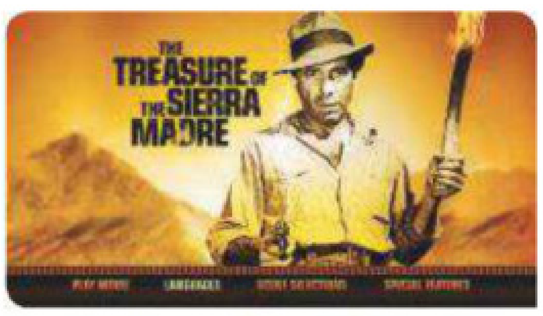
Marlon Brando (below) was the only one of *A Streetcar Named Desire*'s four leads not to win an Oscar for his performance

















HCC Verdict

The Jazz Singer/Grand Hotel/ The Maltese Falcon/The Treasure of the Sierra Madre/A Streetcar Named Desire → Warner Home Video → All-region BD → £20 each

WE SAY: Five unmissable Hollywood classics given deluxe treatment on BD

Movie ★★★★½
Picture ★★★★½
Audio ★★★½
Extras ★★★★
Overall ★★★★½

→ Warner Classics Steelbooks

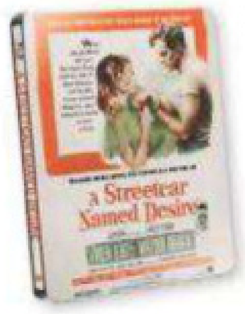
Warner Home Video decided to kick off 2013 in the UK by looking back into its distant past and dusting off some of its biggest and best catalogue titles for a new range of Blu-rays.

Boasting eye-catching steelbook packaging that uses the original poster art and joined by UltraViolet Digital Copies, the lineup includes a selection of previously available Hollywood classics (such as *Ben-Hur* and *Casablanca*), plus five other landmark movies all making their UK Blu-ray debut. And it's these latter five – *The Jazz Singer*, *Grand Hotel*, *The Maltese Falcon*, *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* – we're looking at here.

Picture: Four of the discs in question employ AVC encodes, the exception being *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, which uses the VC-1 codec. Not that this decision appears to have had any noticeable impact on the overall image quality.

All five films certainly look very cinematic, with their 1.37:1 1080p visuals harbouring plenty of natural film grain. Contrast is also very impressive across the range, with clean whites, deep blacks and plenty of nuanced shades of grey in between.

Detail levels are also agreeable – if more obviously dictated by the source material than the other elements we've discussed here. The lack of pin-sharp clarity in some of the movies can probably be put down to the regular use of diffuse lighting to preserve the vanity of some of the stars. It's also worth noting that the original negatives for *Grand Hotel* simply no longer exists, which meant Warner Bros' restoration team were forced to work with lesser materials – which only adds to your appreciation of the miracles they have performed in bringing all of these flicks to BD.



Audio: Once again, there's nothing technically wrong with any of the DTS-HD MA mono soundtracks that can't be attributed to the original source material. On the whole, they are exquisitely rendered, with clear dialogue and plenty of musicality – just not a lot of low-end bombast.

Understandably, as the first movie to include synchronised dialogue and singing, 1927's *The Jazz Singer* has some issues with the limitations of the Vitaphone system utilised, but this Blu-ray still puts in a solid effort recreating the authentic range and fidelity of the original recordings.

Extras: As well as the accompanying UltraViolet Digital Copies, each of these Blu-ray steelbooks boasts special features in the form of audio commentaries, retrospective documentaries, radio adaptations and archival material that would have accompanied them on their cinema release (newsreels, plus live-action and animated shorts).

The bulk of this material comes from earlier DVD releases, so most of it is also presented here in standard-def. However, the 1936 Merry Melodies cartoon *I Love to Singa* is presented in 1080p alongside *The Jazz Singer*.

Samsara

Arrow Films → Region B BD/R2 DVD
£23 Approx

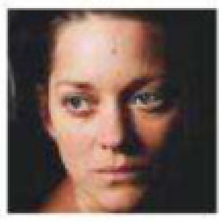


During one of the behind-the-scenes featurettes included on this Blu-ray platter, director Ron Fricke describes his latest film as a 'non-verbal guided meditation on the cycle of birth, death and re-birth'. While this might sound terribly pretentious, the truth is that *Samsara* is one of the most striking hi-def experiences around. Shot entirely in 70mm, scanned in 8K and mastered at 4K, the detail and colour fidelity in the disc's AVC 2.40:1 1080p imagery is unparalleled. The accompanying DTS-HD MA 7.1 soundtrack also impresses with its rich tones and wide staging.

★★★★½

Rust and Bone

StudioCanal → Region B BD
£25 Approx

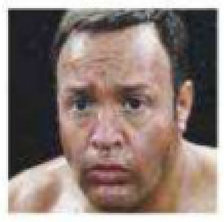


Marion Cotillard delivers yet another electrifying performance in this heart-wrenching French drama from the director of *A Prophet*. She plays a killer whale trainer who loses both of her legs in an accident and then becomes involved with a self-obsessed single father who scrapes a living competing in illegal kickboxing fights between temporary jobs. This hi-def outing conjures up some crisply detailed AVC 2.40:1 1080p imagery as well as an involving DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix. An hour-long *Making of...* documentary, visual effects reel and commentary are among the disc's excellent bonus features.

★★★★☆

Here Comes the Boom

Sony Pictures → All-region BD
£22 Approx

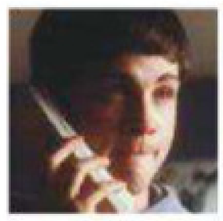


Portly comic Kevin James stars in this surprisingly enjoyable *Dodgeball*-cum-*Rocky* MMA comedy, with able support from Henry Winkler and Salma Hayek. Sony's Blu-ray release carries on the feelgood vibes with both pitch-perfect HD visuals and meatily imbued DTS-HD MA sonics. When James' character Scott steps into the octagon for yet another pummelling, you'll think you're right there with him. The extra features are of the expected length and quality – buyers get a range of short featurettes (all in HD), a gag-reel and a chunk of deleted scenes.

★★★★☆

The Perks of Being a Wallflower

EntertainmentOne → Region B BD
£25 Approx



Logan Lerman, Emma Watson and Ezra Miller star as a trio of high school misfits who... Zzzz... Oh, sorry, I must have nodded off there – while competently acted and directed, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* feels almost identical to the numerous other Hollywood coming-of-age dramas. The BD's AVC 1.78:1 1080p encode boasts a surprisingly heavy (if authentic) layer of grain, while the DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix is mainly given over to dialogue and '80s pop songs. Modest extras include a pair of chat-tracks.

★★½☆☆



The bad, the worse and the ugly

Sexy, violent and mischievous new crime thriller leaves no Stone left unturned

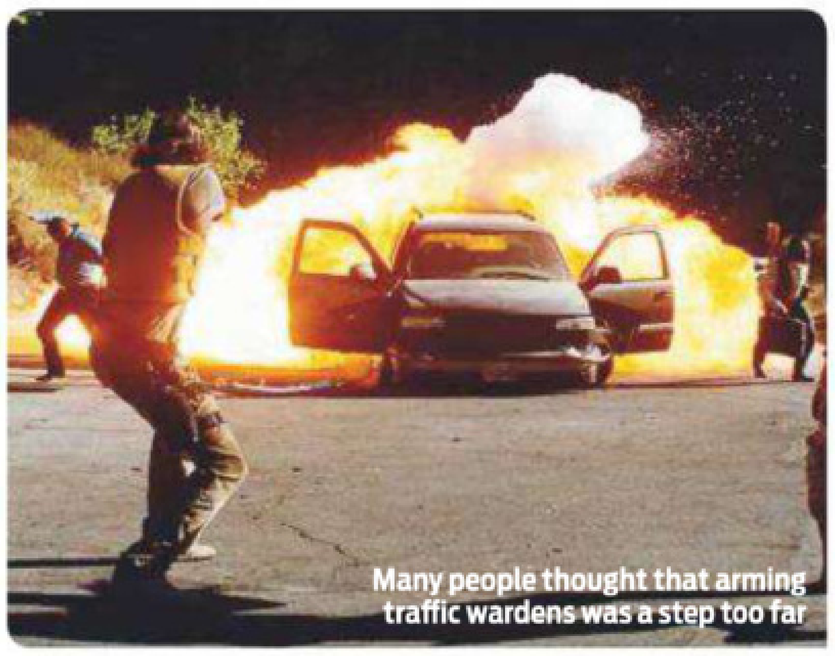
→ Savages

Based on a novel by Don Winslow, *Savages* stars Blake Lively as 'O', a somewhat unreliable narrator ('Just because I'm telling you this doesn't mean I'm alive at the end,' she says early on) and beach bunny girlfriend to Southern Californian dope growers Chon (Taylor Kitch) and Ben (Aaron Johnson). Unfortunately, the trio's idyllic and hedonistic lifestyle goes completely to pot when a Mexican cartel decides to muscle in on the action...

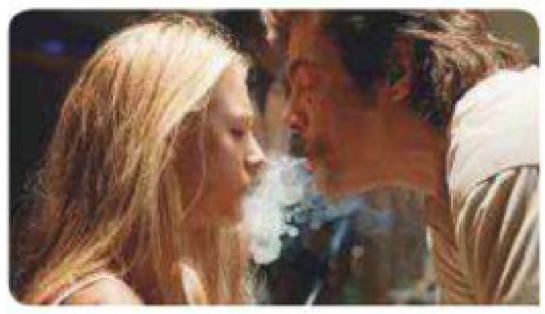
Over the past decade it's become harder and harder to shake the feeling that Oliver Stone has lost his edge as a filmmaker; *Alexander* (in all its many guises), *World Trade Center*, *W.* and *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps* all lacked the boundless energy and anger that made his earlier work so compelling.

Thankfully, even if it's a bit too messy to be considered a true return to form, *Savages* finds Stone immersing viewers in the same kind of pulp thrills he previously explored in the darkly delicious and completely bonkers *U-Turn*. Disturbing, violent and funny, *Savages* has a few too many twists up its sleeve for its own good – but it's powered by such relentless vigour and populated by so many grotesquely fascinating characters that you can't help but appreciate its sheer audacity.

Picture: The film's sunburnt, pin-sharp AVC 2.40:1 Full HD encode transforms your room into a world of vibrant primary colours and jet-black shadows, with Stone once again playing around with colour grading, often pushing greens, blues and oranges to extremes and running the contrast hot with blinding white highlights that burst off the screen. Scorching.



Many people thought that arming traffic wardens was a step too far





Audio: *Savages*' DTS-HD MA 5.1 soundtrack is as satisfying as its image quality. Quieter moments benefit from subtle surround ambience and clear dialogue, and when the action kicks in the mix proves its mettle. In these moments the full soundstage erupts, showing off an imposing verve and vigour.

Extras: Universal's Blu-ray release features two cuts of the main feature – the 131-minute cinema release and a new 141-minute version that throws in more violence and benefits from additional character beats.

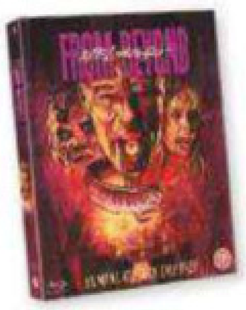
More traditional extra features take the form of a five-part *Making of...* documentary (total running time: 34 minutes), nine deleted scenes and a pair of excellent audio commentaries. The first is a solo track by Stone, while the second features input from producers Eric Kopeloff and Moritz Borman, co-writer Don Winslow, exec producer/co-writer Shane Salerno and production designer Tomás Voth.

HCC Verdict

Savages: Uncut and Extended
→ Universal Pictures
→ All-region BD → £25 Approx

WE SAY: Not Oliver Stone's best, but still a thrilling and garish slice of ultra-violent pulp fiction

Movie	★★★½☆
Picture	★★★★½
Audio	★★★★½
Extras	★★★½☆
Overall	★★★½☆



Gore comes back from beyond

Stuart Gordon's fan-favourite 1980s horror is restored to its original bloody glory

→ From Beyond

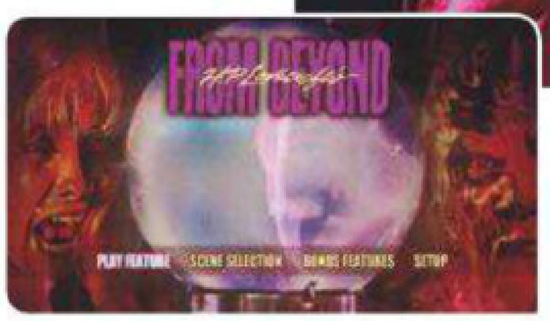
Following the success of *Re-Animator*, director Stuart Gordon once again joined forces with actors Jeffrey Combes and Barbara Crampton to tackle another H.P. Lovecraft tale.

Just like their earlier collaboration, *From Beyond* takes the basic elements from Lovecraft's short story (a machine that allows you to see the horrors that lurk beyond human perception) and then loads it up with lashings of kinky sex, gory violence and gloopy, slime-coated latex beasties. In other words, it's everything you could want from an '80s horror – and is finally available in the UK completely uncut.

Picture: For the most part, *From Beyond* definitely benefits from the move to hi-def. Detailing and clarity are both up to scratch, but the real beneficiary of the AVC 1.85:1 1080p encode is colour reproduction, with the regular washes of red and violet lighting pinging from your display.



There's nothing worse than getting bubblegum stuck in your hair



An exception to the above comes from the reintegrated 'lost' footage. While attempts have been made to clean it up as much as possible and correct the colour timing, it stands out more than ever in this HD incarnation thanks to its comparative lack of sharpness and faded colours. But that's a small price to pay for having the censored material reinstated into the movie.

Audio: The disc includes two lossless audio tracks – an LPCM 2.0 stereo mix and a DTS-HD MA 4.0 surround track. The latter uses the surround speakers to extend the reach of the film's score and to throw out some effective positional effects (such as the opening chapter's breaking windows) whenever the Resonator is fired up.

Extras: The bulk of the extras on this hi-def platter come from MGM's 2007 Special Edition DVD – but as that was never released in the UK, it's no bad thing. These take the form of a commentary by the cast and crew, interviews with the director and composer, a look at the restoration of the censored footage, a photo gallery and a storyboard-to-film comparison.

The new material (all presented in HD) comprises a quartet of lengthy interviews with director Stuart Gordon, actress Barbara Crampton, writer Dennis Paoli and some of the SFX team.

HCC Verdict

From Beyond
→ Second Sight
→ Region B BD → £25 Approx

WE SAY: This cult '80s horror should find plenty of new fans thanks to its feature-packed hi-def release

Movie ★★★★☆
Picture ★★★½☆
Audio ★★★☆☆
Extras ★★★★☆
Overall ★★★★☆

Death Race 3: Inferno

Universal Pictures → All-region BD
£20 Approx



This sequel to the prequel to Paul Anderson's 2008 remake takes the *Death Race* concept on the road in order to unleash the heavy metal carnage in Africa. The result is both stupid and misogynistic (leading lady Tanit Phoenix essentially plays a pair of breasts squeezed into a tight leather costume) – and yet it still manages to entertain more than this played-out franchise has any right to. The Blu-ray itself makes quite an impression with its sun-bleached AVC 1.78:1 1080p visuals and impactful DTS-HD MA 5.1 audio (since when did DTV sequels sound this good?), not to mention a reasonable set of bonus features.

★★★☆☆

Black Sunday

Arrow Video → Region B BD/R2 DVD
£20 Approx

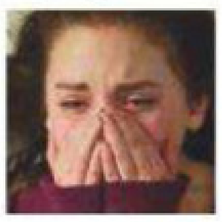


This beautifully restored release of Mario Bava's 1960 horror debut *Mask of Satan* is yet more proof that there are very few other labels that treat cult films with as much care as Arrow Video. Its HD platter kicks off with both the uncut 87-minute version under its original title and the 83-minute US re-edit (re-titled *Black Sunday*). Adding to the comprehensive feel of the package is the inclusion of Italian and English language tracks for *Mask...*, and extras including an audio commentary, the complete 1956 film *I Vampiri* (in SD) and a 54-minute trailer reel for Bava's filmography.

★★★★½

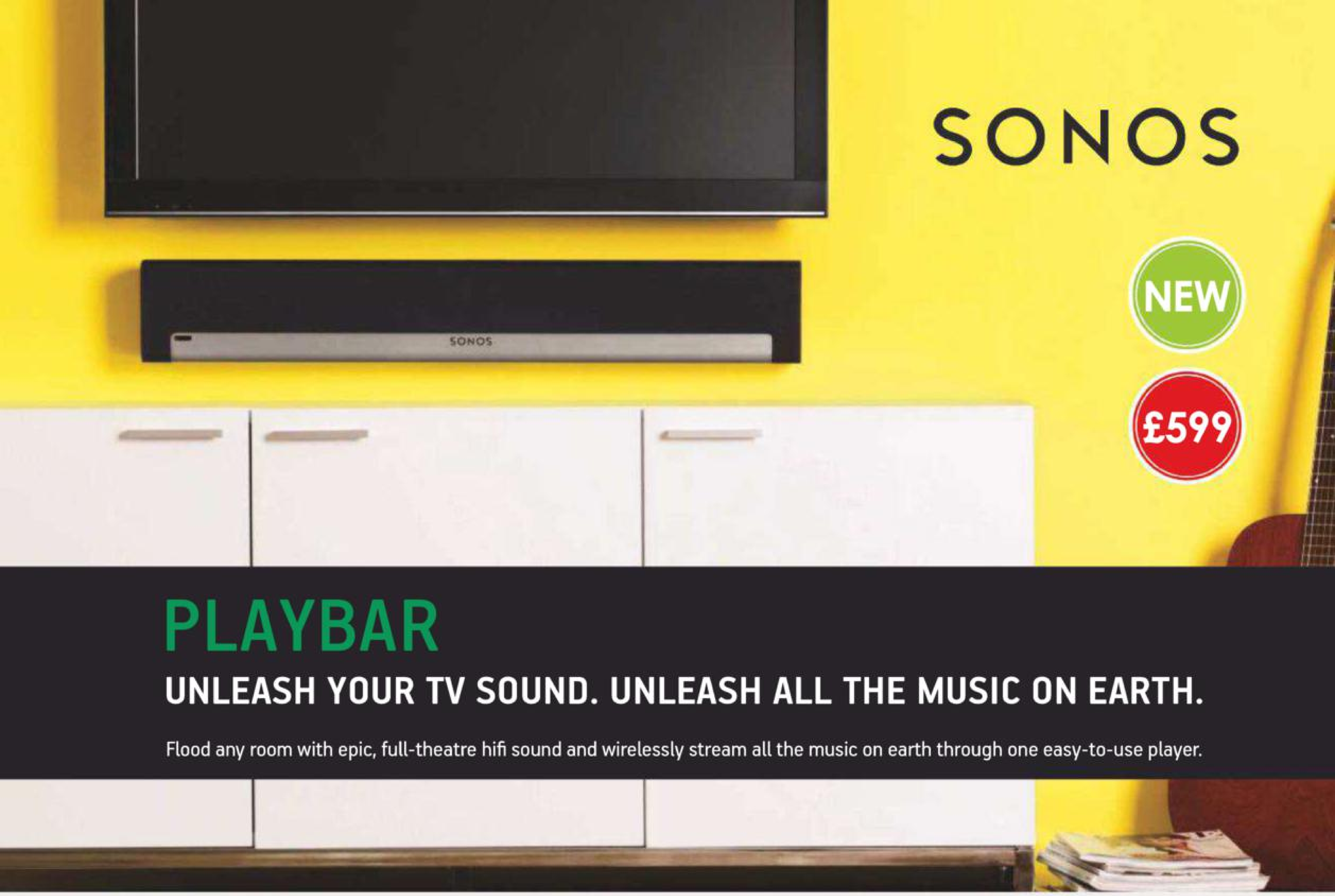
The Possession: Uncut Edition

Lionsgate → Region B BD
£25 Approx



This generically-titled shocker claims to be 'Based on a true story'. But while one of the bonus features makes it clear that the pre-credit sequence has its basis in a supposedly real event, the rest of *The Possession* is so blatantly derivative of William Friedkin's 1973 horror classic that it might as well come with a label that reads 'Based on *The Exorcist*'. On a more positive note, the sheer quality of *The Possession*'s AVC 2.40:1 1080p encode and DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix ensure that it won't disgrace your home cinema should you choose to give this Blu-ray a spin.

★★☆☆☆



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Outstanding	★★★★★
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Dire	★☆☆☆☆

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Top 10 TELEVISIONS

All prices are approx and may have changed



1 Panasonic TX-P55VT50 → £3,000
★★★★★

Panasonic's plasma TVs continue to impress, and this 55in VT50 model represents the best of its 2012 range – picture strengths include typically cinematic images with exquisite black levels, and the design is simply gorgeous



2 Sony KDL-55HX853 → £1,800 ★★★★★
Sony has returned to form with this 55in LED 3DTV that majors on detail and motion handling, and sports a price that undercuts similar-sized rivals. Buy with confidence



3 Samsung UE55ES8000 → £2,500 ★★★★★
While its Smart features certainly catch the eye – particularly voice and gesture control – this super-slim LED set delivers where it counts, with vibrant HD images that frequently dazzle



4 LG 84LM960V → £22,500 ★★★★★
LG's debut Ultra HD (4K) TV is an eye-opening look at the future of home cinema technology, with upscaled BDs benefitting from the pixel push. Hardly cheap, though



5 Philips 55PFL6007 → £1,700 ★★★★½
Not one of Philips' top-flight models, but this Passive 3D bigscreen is superb value for money. Imagery is consistently good and the slim-bezel design works wonders with the 55in panel



6 Philips 46PFL9707 → £2,300 ★★★★½
Philips' second iteration of its Moth Eye screen technology continues to offer astonishing contrast. This set is at its best with 2D HD material, though: crosstalk with 3D is apparent



7 Toshiba 40RL858 → £500 ★★★½
An ideal set for a budget setup – there's no 3D on offer here, or Toshiba's CEVO processing, but the £500 ticket gets you a smart brushed aluminium trim and sharp HD images



8 Samsung UE32EH5000 → £400 ★★★½
If you need a 32in TV, this is the model to get – what it lacks in Smart skills it makes for in the AV department. Both HD and SD material impresses and the price ain't bad either



9 LG 47LM670 → £1,500 ★★★★
A mid-range screen that offers real value for money. Design-wise, it's an absolute triumph, and the Passive 3D is great for social occasions. Shadow detailing could be better, though



10 Samsung PS60E6500 → £1,600 ★★★★½
This middle-of-the-road 60incher shows there's more than one brand with plasma on its mind. The price is great and the HD and 3D performance enjoyable. Worth an audition

Tech Info: Televisions



Plasma or LCD?: The TV market is becoming increasingly dominated by LED-lit LCD screens that are much, much thinner than traditional cold cathode fluorescent lamp (CCFL) screens. For 42in and above, plasma display panels (PDPs) come into play, although LED screens up to 70ins are also hitting the high street – and 84in 4K panels are also on the way. Plasma screens generally offer superior black levels, better viewing angles and less 3D crosstalk, but less brightness and a higher energy consumption. There's also a more limited choice – with just Samsung, LG and Panasonic selling plasma TVs in the UK.



Active or Passive: At the beginning of the 3D revolution, most TVs featured the Active system that uses relatively expensive, powered 3D specs to deliver Full HD images to each eye. Passive 3D TVs, which are increasingly common and now sold by LG, Philips, Toshiba and Panasonic, have a filter over the screen and use non-powered specs with polarising filters. The glasses are cheap as chips, but the resolution of Full HD 3D is halved to 540 lines horizontally (but remains at 1,920 vertically). Glasses-free 3D is in its infancy, with just Toshiba's ZL2 set on sale at present.

Top 5 BLU-RAY MOVIES



The Expendables 2
With its 7.1 DTS-HD Master Audio mix 'optimised' for 11-channel Neo:X and its macho cast list (including Chuck Norris and Jean Claude Van Damme), this is a treat for those who like their movies loud and ludicrous.
★★★★½



Prometheus
Ridley Scott returns to his *Alien* universe for another slice of gory, intense sci-fi horror. While it doesn't quite live up to the standards he set in 1979, this is still superior filmmaking – and the BD is a cracker.
★★★★★



Dredd 3D
This no-nonsense comic book actioner gives *Judge Dredd* fans what they always wanted, and the stereoscopic presentation on EiV's Blu-ray is remarkable – don your 3D spex and settle in for the ride!
★★★★½



Brave
Pixar does its own take on the Disney Princess genre with this beautifully animated and cleverly scripted 'toon. The BD release offers exquisite Full HD imagery and a thunderous 7.1 Dolby TrueHD mix.
★★★★½



Looper
Bruce Willis and Joseph Gordon-Levitt headline this unmissable brain-muddling time-travel flick, which arrives on Blu-ray with a flawless DTS-HD MA 5.1 soundtrack and sharp 1080p visuals.
★★★★★

Top 10 BLU-RAY PLAYERS

All prices are approx and may have changed

1



Oppo BDP-103EU → £500 ★★★★★

Oppo's first deck for two years has been worth waiting for. The universal BDP-103EU features a class-leading build and all manner of bonus goodies, including twin HDMI inputs should you want to lavish some of its processing power on lesser components. AV performance is faultless, and the onscreen menus are superb. All hail the the new king of Blu!

2



Sony BDP-S790 → £240 ★★★★★

This range-topping deck represents a bargain AV purchase. As well as its 4K upscaling talents, the Sony delivers BDs and DVDs with aplomb, spins SACDs and offers twin HDMI outputs. Classy

3



Oppo BDP-105EU → £1,000 ★★★★★

This heavyweight deck builds on the premium picture performance of the BDP-103EU with a wealth of audiophile upgrades – if you're serious about music, check it out

4



Cambridge Audio Azur 751BD → £800 ★★★★★

If we were designing a BD deck from scratch it would look a lot like this – built like a battleship and taking whatever disc format you throw at it in its stride. Blessed with sonic finesse

5



Pioneer BDP-450 → £230 ★★★★½

Currently the most affordable universal player, the BDP-450 ignores analogue outputs and concentrates solely on the digital age. Well-built and an assured performer

6



Pioneer BDP-LX55 → £350 ★★★★½

An impressively-styled and well-built universal player with a BD performance that's hard to fault and a clean way with CDs. The Smart cupboard is a little bare, though

7



Denon DBT-3313UD → £900 ★★★★☆

As a 'transport' rather than a player, this universal Denon lacks built-in decoders and analogue outputs, but partner it with one of the brand's AVRs via Denon Link HD and you'll be rewarded

8



Panasonic DMP-BDT500 → £300 ★★★★☆

Panasonic's range-topper loves your Blu-ray collection. HD images are sharp and fluid and it doubles as a great Smart hub. The touchpad remote is a bit tricksy, though

9



Sony BDP-S185 → £90 ★★★★☆

A fantastically priced player that mixes a decent AV performance with Sony's content-rich VOD service. Ideal for a budget system or bedroom addition

10



Dune Smart B1 → £240 ★★★★☆

Looking more like an external PC drive than a typical BD player, Dune's device is packed with techie features (eSATA port, Samba/SMB support) that make up for the lack of 3D

Tech Info: Blu-ray players

Matching your deck to your AV receiver: Blu-ray decks are designed to deliver top-notch images (some do it much better than others, of course) but Blu-ray is also about enjoying superior quality sound. When choosing a player, bear in mind the connectivity and decoding features of your AV receiver. If you're still using an older model that doesn't offer HDMI inputs, then you'll need a Blu-ray player with multichannel analogue audio outputs to enjoy decoded hi-res surround sound formats. Similarly, older but still HDMI-equipped receivers may not be able to cope with 3D video signals, in which case you'll need a deck with dual HDMI outputs – one channeling audio to your receiver amp, the othe piping video direct to your TV.

What about the PlayStation 3?: Sony's console ushered in the era of Blu-ray playback in 2006 and still represents an easy path to hi-def heaven. For a low-budget home cinema system, the £200 PS3 Slim (160GB) makes a decent choice – especially if you like playing games (in 3D, if you fancy it). Control via a joypad is a pain, though, and the console runs more noisily than most traditional BD spinners.



Demo delight

Prometheus: Ridley Scott's return to the sci-fi genre is a treat for your senses, with a crystal-clear HD image and spine-tingling sonics. The 3D presentation of this outer-space horror is impressive too – it oozes depth and proves utterly immersive

SONY Home Cinema Projector Range

HW30 HW50 VW95 VW1000ES



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Top 10 PROJECTORS

All prices are approx and may have changed

1


Sony VPL-HW50ES → £3,000
★★★★★

Another compelling example of Sony's rediscovered obsession with quality and a model that no one in the market for a mid-range projector can afford to ignore. Your film collecton is in safe hands here

2


JVC X35 → £2,900 ★★★★½
The £3,000 price point is the hot spot for home cinema PJs, and JVC's 'entry-level' D-ILA model is definitely worth auditioning – especially if you're not fussed about its '4K' scaling siblings

3


Sony VPL-VW1000ES → £17,000 ★★★★★
Sony's flagship projector is an absolute triumph, giving film fanatics the chance to upscale their Blu-ray collection to 4K resolution. The start of a new era? We hope so!

4


SIM2 Nero 3D-1 → £13,000 ★★★★★
That this isn't SIM2's most expensive model says a lot about the premium projector brand. Yet the DLP-based 3D-1 is still an awe-inspiring beamer, with 3D a particular strength

5

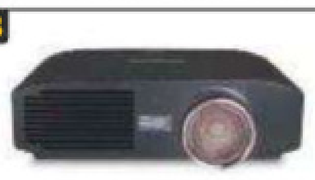

JVC DLX-X90 → £9,600 ★★★★★
A step up from the more sensibly priced X70, JVC's range-topper uses only AAA-grade optics and claims an improved contrast. In use, it delivers best-in-class black levels and razor-sharp pics

6


Runco LightStyle LS1 → £4,000 ★★★★½
With a price tag not usually seen on Runco PJs, the LS1 is an excellent choice for those who aren't interested in 3D. This 2D-only DLP model offers brilliant HD pics and ISF certification

7


Epson EH-TW8100 → £2,300 ★★★★☆
Don't want the ISF certification, 3D glasses or wireless HD transmission of the EH-TW9100W (below)? Then save youself £600 and grab this well-priced offering instead

8


Panasonic PT-AT6000E → £2,900 ★★★★☆
Panasonic's newest PJ is undeniably a brilliant performer with 2D, but 3D movies could do with an increase in brightness. Maybe that's why you don't even get any 3D spex bundled in the box...

9


Optoma HD33 → £1,300 ★★★★☆
A decent budget 3D projector from Optoma, the HD33 offers well-judged picture presets, sharp, clean 2D/3D pics and living-room friendly looks. A little noisy in operation

10


Epson EH-TW9100W → £2,900 ★★★★☆
This mid-range LCD model improves the wireless HD feature over its predecessor with more inputs, and offers an improved contrast performance. Decent calibration options

Tech Info: Projectors



Installation: Although projectors can be temporarily placed on a cupboard, stand or shelf situated at the rear of the room (use the adjustable feet on its base to level the image so that it aligns with the screen), a much better long-term solution is to mount it on your ceiling with an appropriate bracket. Projectors can be quite heavy, though, so it's important to ensure that the bracket is attached firmly – ideally, it should be secured to a joist. Position your PJ so that an imaginary line from its lens to the opposite side of the room hits the screen exactly half-way along its width. The location of your screen should therefore dictate where your projector is. A decent tape-measure or laser pointer will help you to determine the position.

Throw distance: Throw distance specifies the distance between the projector and screen for a focused image of given size. As the vast majority of projectors are equipped with a zoom lens, minimum and maximum throw distances are often specified – say, 3.01m to 6.08m for a 100in. 16:9 image. Shorter throw distances are ideal for smaller rooms, and longer ones for larger rooms. Simple.

Throw ratio: Sometimes, a manufacturer will quote a throw ratio rather than a throw distance. This is basically the throw distance divided by the image width. To get the projected image size, divide the distance between projector and screen by the specified figure. Once again, the inclusion of a zoom lens means that upper and lower figures are usually specified.



Top 10 SPEAKERS

All prices are approx and may have changed

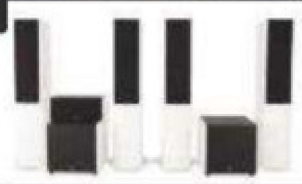
1



Wharfedale DX-1 HCP → £400
★★★★★

You can spend a fortune on a 5.1 speaker set, but those on tight budgets aren't ignored. Wharfedale's affordable package looks gorgeous and sounds fantastic, with its tight, fast subwoofer underpinning the satellites with ease

2



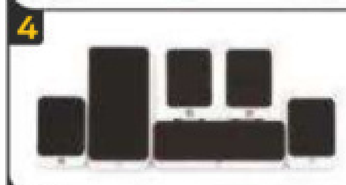
Boston Acoustics A Series → £2,200 ★★★★★
Boston Acoustics roped in audio guru Ken Ishiwata from sister brand Marantz to finetune this floorstanding range – the result is a mid-range setup that mixes detail and scale

3



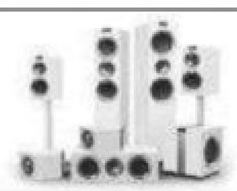
Bowers & Wilkins MT-60D → £2,000 ★★★★★
This 5.1 set from B&W sits at the upper end of the sub/sat market, but buyers are rewarded by a potent performance, with the PV1D subwoofer dazzling in particular. They look lovely, too

4



Q Acoustics Q2000i → £600 ★★★★★
Another superior sub/sat array from the sonic wizards at Q Acoustics, this marries some surprisingly full-bodied satellite speakers to an easy-to-accommodate 2 x 6in sub

5



KEF R Series → £6,500 ★★★★★
A 7.1 array mixing dipolar and direct radiating surrounds, this package takes its cues from KEF's Blade speaker and offers faultless, largescale, home cinema sonics

6



Jamo D600 → £5,000 ★★★★★
Jamo's THX Ultra2-certified system is ideal if you're building a dedicated cinema rooms – what you miss out on in terms of styling is more than made up for by the ferocious performance

7



Acoustic Energy Aegis Neo Max → £2,000 ★★★★★
Why stop at 5.1 when you can get a 7.1 array for just £2,000? Acoustic Energy's package is an affordable gateway to full-on surround sound. Not the prettiest speakers around, though

8



Monitor Audio Gold GX → £7,150 ★★★★★
More affordbale than the flagship Platinum range, this 5.1 Gold system still showcases Monitor Audio's strengths – exquisite-looking floorstanders with a rich, intricate, powerful sound

9



KEF T205 → £1,500 ★★★★★
KEF's T Series brings high-quality sonics to your living room with the minimum of intrusion – these thin, flatpanel speakers are far more impressive than you might think

10



Monitor Audio MASS 5.1 → £800 ★★★★★
Five angular satellite speakers joined by a potent (and quite large) 220W subwoofer, MA's MASS 5.1 delivers detailed surround sonics and enough grunt for regular-sized rooms

Tech Info: Speakers



Centre speaker: Handles most of the dialogue and onscreen effects. Should be positioned above or below the screen as close to it as possible. Of course, if you're using a projector screen, it should ideally be placed behind it.

Front speakers: Left and right speakers should be positioned either side of the screen, in line with the centre. Turn the speakers in slightly to face the listener if there isn't an even movement of sound across the front of the room.

Subwoofer: Can be positioned wherever it sounds best or can be tucked out of sight due to the non-directional nature of low-frequency signals. Be aware that close positioning in corners or next to walls can create a boomy effect.

Surrounds: Position alongside the listener, pointing in or slightly behind the ears for a good surround effect. The back wall is not a good position for surrounds – it is, in fact, where you should locate the sixth and seventh speakers (rears) in a traditional 7.1 array.

Demo delight

Gladiator: While it's often the low-end oomph of your sub that impresses friends and family, the high-frequency poise of your speakers is equally important, lending authenticity to the copious Foley effects that litter film soundtracks. The Colosseum fight sequence in *Gladiator*, with its clashing swords, is a perfect test for your tweeters

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CEDIA AWARDS 2012 FINALIST

Top 10 AV RECEIVERS/AV PROCESSORS/POWER AMPLIFIERS

All prices are approx and may have changed

1 NEW ENTRY



Denon AVR-4520 → £2,300
★★★★★

Denon's flagship AV receiver sees the brand return to the high-end in style. This 9.2-channel powerhouse mixes subtlety and detailing with brute force and dynamism. Build quality is high and its networking talents impressive

2



Sony STR-DA5700ES → £2,000 ★★★★★
Sony's STR-DA5700ES is unique among AVRs for offering both built-in Ethernet switching (handy) and video-on-demand (also handy). Flexible, good-looking... and it sounds fabulous

3



Onkyo TX-NR5010 → £3,000 ★★★★★
The top-of-the-range Onkyo warrants is £3,000 ticket by virtue of massive nine-channel power reserves and an extensive feature list. One for serious setups

4



Denon AVR-3313 → £1,100 ★★★★★
Sonic detailing is the order of the day here, with the Denon crafting soundstages with considerable finesse. Spotify, Denon Link HD and triple HDMI outputs are the feature highlights

5



Onkyo TX-NR818 → £1,000 ★★★★★
This mid-range 2012 offering from Onkyo introduces compatibility with Dolby TrueHD MLP files, and serves up a well-rounded sound backed by hefty power reserves

6



Pioneer SC-LX86 → £2,000 ★★★★½
As the Japanese corp's top dog, the SC-LX86 is packed with features and built to last. Get to grips with its detailed setup process and you're in for multichannel thrills

7 NEW ENTRY



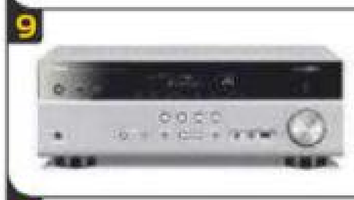
Cambridge Audio Azur 751R → £1,600 ★★★★☆
Counting against the Azur 751R is its total lack of networking abilities and old-school interface, but its multichannel and stereo audio performance is hard to beat at this price

8



Marantz NR1603 → £550 ★★★★☆
The brand's second-gen 'slimline' AVR continues to offer brilliant streaming prowess and enough grunt for its target audience – but the lack of built-in Wi-Fi is annoying

9



Yamaha RX-V473 → £340 ★★★★☆
Tantalisingly priced, clean-sounding and sporting Apple AirPlay compatability, the RX-V473 is easily recommended. Get it in its silver finish if possible – it looks awesome

10



Pioneer SC-2022 → £900 ★★★★☆
Another Pioneer AVR that dazzles with its slick control features and crystal-clear audio presentation. But at this price you'd expect a second HDMI output

Tech Info: AV receivers



Tackling new heights: You may find your AV receiver offering Dolby Pro-Logic IIz, Audyssey DSX or DTS Neo: X post-processing – possibly all three. All of these can deliver two further Front Height channels, with the aim of adding weight and control to the front soundstage, particularly in terms of lifting the centre channel and adding scale to vertical surround effects – rainfall for example. The catch is that you will need to add two new physical speakers, mounted near your ceiling above the regular left and right channel cabinets, and make use of two of the receiver's channels of amplification, which could mean forgoing a second stereo zone or rear surrounds speakers. Note that the Audyssey and DTS modes also cater for Front Wide speakers (picured above), but this idea seems to be gaining less traction within the industry.

How much power?: Many of the mass-market AV receiver manufacturers are involved in a specifications race to see who can say their model is the most powerful, which can be confusing for consumers. For instance, both Krell's £7,000 S-1500 seven-channel power amp and Yamaha's £500 RX-V671 both claim 7 x 150W – the important part is that Krell's figure is into an eight-Ohm load with all channels driven, and that Yamaha's is with one channel into a four-Ohm load, which is hardly a real-world situation. The best advice is ignore the numbers game and get a demo of your desired AVR with the same, or similar, speakers that you intend to partner it with.

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Top 10 SUBWOOFERS

All prices are approx & may have changed

1 

Bowers & Wilkins DB1 → £3,250
★★★★★

Featuring a bipolar arrangement of 12in drivers powered by 1,000W of amplification, B&W's stylish flagship sub is a faultless performer, offering both musicality and sheer muscle. Fit to partner the finest of speakers

2 

JL Audio Fathom F212 → £5,900 ★★★★★
The US brand arrives in the UK in style – this 2 x 12in, 3000W brute not only looks gorgeous, it's capable of a mindblowing performance. Got a big room? Get one of these!

3 

Tannoy TS2.12 → £550 ★★★★★
The TS2.12 is easily Tannoy's best woofer yet – using a 12in driver (opposite a passive 12in cone) and 500W amp to deliver a rich, warm bass performance. Affordable and good-looking, too

4 

Velodyne SPL-800 Ultra → £1,150 ★★★★★
Proof that even 'small' subwoofers can offer a brilliant performance. The 8in driver is helped by a 1,200W amp and mic-assisted room EQ. Tight and fast

5 

REL T5 → £450 ★★★★★
The 8in T5 provides a slice of REL engineering at a surprisingly affordable price. Highlights include the simultaneous speaker-level and LFE inputs and pleasing Class A/B sound

6 

Bowers & Wilkins PV1D → £1,200 ★★★★★
Possibly the coolest-looking subwoofer on the planet, B&W's revamped PV1 uses its DSP trickery to craft an opulent low-end performance. The touch-sensitive OLED display is pure class

7 

Velodyne DD18+ → £5,800 ★★★★★
If you have a large cinema room then this second-gen 18in beast from Velodyne will appeal. The performance is as brilliant as you'd expect for the price and specification

8 

REL G1 → £3,300 ★★★★★
A top-of-the range woofer with a price tag to match, buyers of REL's G1 can rest assured they're getting a best-in-breed product. Delivers a warm, rich sound with slam and depth

9 

Q Acoustics 2070si → £250 ★★★★☆
A cracking value sub with a smart elongated-oblong design that may make it easier to fit in your room. Each of its 6.5in woofers are driven by a 75W amp

10 

Velodyne EQ-Max12 → £800 ★★★★☆
A solid mid-range sub from the bass masters at Velodyne, with a foolproof auto EQ system in addition to a quartet of sound presets. Doesn't exactly ooze design style, though

Tech Info



Why use more than one sub?: Using two subwoofers (or perhaps four) should, in theory, bring huge rewards in terms of bass performance. But remember that LFE is a tricky beast to control. Running two subs may simply double problems in your room like room boom and suck-outs, where outgoing and reflected bass sounds cancel each other out. If you have some flexibility in where you place subwoofers, trial and error may well throw up some interesting results. The acoustics wizard Floyd E Toole (his book *Sound Reproduction: The Acoustics and Psychoacoustics of Loudspeakers and Rooms* is fine bedtime reading) suggests one LFE sub to either side of the room may be best for accuracy while placing them in the front corners would be best for overall bass power. Yet there is no hard and fast rule as to what will work best for every room, and you may find that simply using one (large) subwoofer is preferrable as it's the easiest to get sounding right.

Demo delight

Jurassic Park: Steven Spielberg's dinosaur-packed blockbuster is rightly remembered for its cutting-edge CGI, but the surround sound mix is equally impressive. The Blu-ray release provides a perfect test for your subwoofer, with the ominous footfalls of the T-Rex so loud and low in the mix that you should find yourself as terrified as Jeff Goldblum's fast-talking mathematician. If you don't – well, you need a new woofer.

Top 5 HD GAMES



Far Cry 3
An open-world first-person actioner, *Far Cry 3* feels like a breath of fresh air for the genre, with players equally likely to spend time hunting animals as following the kill-the-pirates narrative. Sensational.
★★★★★



Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim
Abandon all hope (of a life), ye who enter here. This third-person action RPG may not be the most visually impressive game around, but it will devour your every waking hour once started. Consider yourself warned...
★★★★★



XCOM: Enemy Unknown
This sequel to the much-loved PC franchise provides a breath of fresh air to console gamers – a turn-based strategy game majoring on brains as well as brawn, drawn with lavish graphics and evocative audio.
★★★★★



Dishonored
This first-person action-adventure puts you in the body of an assassin in a beautifully crafted steampunk world. Convincing characters and great sound design partnered with involving gameplay. We love it.
★★★★★



Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon: Future Soldier
First-rate HD graphics, neat cinematic flourishes and booming audio make this latest entry in the bullets-'n'-brains franchise feel like taking part in *Black Hawk Down*.
★★★★★

Top 10 MEDIA PLAYERS

All prices are approx and may have changed

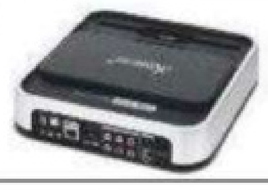
1



Crystal Acoustics Media Matchbox → £55 ★★★★★

Crystal Acoustics' dinky player will happily play nearly everything you throw at it, including MKV, FLAC and BD/DVD ISO files. Pocket-sized and wallet-friendly, it's an essential purchase for those wanting a fuss-free player.

2



Xtreamer iXtreamer → £150 ★★★★★
Incorporating an iPhone/iPod/iPad dock means the iXtreamer isn't the smallest device around, nor is it cheap –but its feature set justifies the price. Even SATA drives can be plumbed in.

3



Western Digital WD TV Live Hub → £200 ★★★★★
The WD's built-in 1TB hard drive explains the £200 ticket. This sleek-looking unit incorporates a faultless user interface and smartphone control, making media browsing a breeze.

4



A.C Ryan PlayOn! HD 2 → £150 ★★★★☆
This 1TB media player counts USB 3.0 for fast file-copying as one of its USPs. It's solidly built, simple to use and ready to tackle a variety of formats, including DVD/BD ISOs.

5



Sony SMP-N200 → £70 ★★★★☆
A bargain-priced box of tricks from Sony, the SMP-N200 offers built-in Wi-Fi, DLNA networking and access to the Sony Entertainment Network, with control via the XrossMediaBar.

6



LG SP820 → £180 ★★★★☆
The second-generation Smart Upgrader from LG adds brains to your 'dumb' telly in the form of apps, Magic Remote control and plenty of VOD. DLNA playback doesn't stretch to FLAC.

7



Digital Stream DPS-1000 → £90 ★★★★☆
Incorporating BBC iPlayer, YouTube and LOVEFiLM makes this a sound choice for VOD fans, although the lack of built-in Wi-Fi (and optional dongle costs £20) is unfortunate.

8



Eminent EM7285 → £165 ★★★★☆
Pricey, but heavy on features (including Wi-Fi, eSATA port, SD card slot and built-in BitTorrent client), Eminent's style-starved player also offers 'user-generated' apps that are worth a shufti.

9



Maxell MMB300 → £150 ★★★☆☆
Using Android 2.3, Maxell's MMB300 offers good web browsing and 'net radio and comes with a DVB-T USB stick 'tuner'. But it holds no truck with DLNA/uPnP.

10



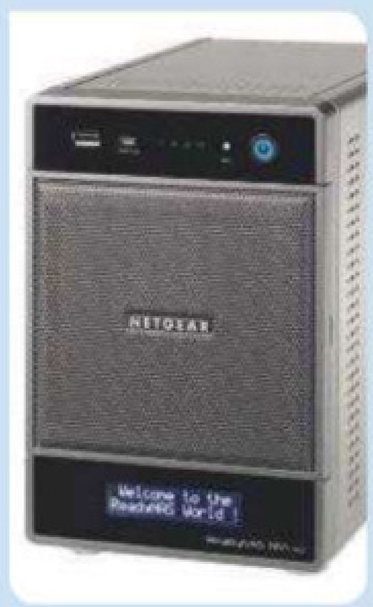
Sony NS7 GS7 → £200 ★★★☆☆
Sony's first Google TV product provides a simple way to bring media playback, web browsing and apps to your TV – but is hampered by a clunky remote and lack of must-have content.

Tech Info: Media players



What about my TV?: Many flatscreen TVs from the major brands (Sony, Samsung, Panasonic, LG, Toshiba and Sharp) also incorporate media player functionality, using Ethernet or Wi-Fi to stream from your home network, or from plugged-in USB drives. Most modern Blu-ray players offer this, too. However, file support is rarely as extensive as on dedicated devices from the likes of Western Digital and A.C. Ryan, and our experience shows some are more adept at playback from USB than over a network. Nor (obviously) is a TV or BD player portable. If your media collection extends beyond JPEGs and MP3s into lossless audio rips and esoteric HD video formats, then a standalone player is a good investment.

Storage: You can, if you really want, store all your files on a plethora of USB drives, or on your PC, but it's best to get a NAS (Network Attached Storage) device for simplified sharing of your media across a network with multiple players, such as one from Netgear's ReadyNAS range (pictured). These dedicated devices often offer RAID array file backup, and are managed via browser software. Storage capacity can be anything from 1TB to 12TB and beyond.



Top 5 BLU-RAY BOX SETS



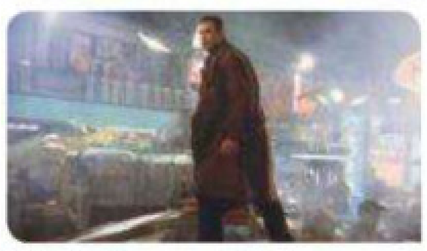
Game of Thrones: The Complete Second Season
Another ten episodes of prime fantasy TV gets a spectacular Blu-ray release courtesy of HBO Home Entertainment – the picture and sound quality consistently impresses.
★★★★★



Indiana Jones: The Complete Adventures
Although the *Raiders of the Lost Ark* restoration isn't the best we've seen, this is a box set that no home cinema fan can afford to be without. And ...*Temple of Doom* is uncut, too!
★★★★☆



Universal Classic Monsters: The Essential Collection
Bag yourself eight great monster movies given a thorough cleanup by Universal Studios – and marvel at the sheer brilliance of *The Creature from the Black Lagoon* in 3D.
★★★★☆



Blade Runner: 30th Anniversary Ultimate Collector's Edition
Which cut of Ridley Scott's sci-fi classic do you prefer? Actually, it doesn't matter – this set boasts all five versions of the film in HD, plus a plethora of bonus goodies.
★★★★½



The Lord of the Rings Trilogy: Extended Edition
Peter Jackson's box office-breaking trilogy simply dazzles in HD, and these extended cuts are perfect for Middle Earth maniacs. Watch the movies then savour the 26 hours of extras.
★★★★★

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Growing numbers of professional home cinema installers in the UK are turning to Starscape for fibre optic and LED solutions, not to mention our professional customers in Belgium, Switzerland, Portugal, South Africa, the Czech Republic and South Africa.

Photo: Artcoustic SA and Sphere Custom Design

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Top 5 PVRs



Virgin Media TiVo, £subscription

This triple-tuner PVR offers ultimate recording flexibility, useful features – you can undelete deleted shows! – and awesome TiVo functionality. A no brainer if you're in a cable area

★★★★★



Sky+HD, £subscription

Sky's channel choice is second-to-none and its twin tuner 2TB PVR is a perfect partner. The recent EPG tweak is welcome and Anytime (the push VOD service) is brilliant for catching up on new movies

★★★★★



Panasonic DMR-HW220, £250

Panasonic's PVR mixes a 1TB hard drive with its Smart Viera functionality and media streaming – so at £250 it's an absolute steal, regardless of the uninspired design

★★★★★



Humax DTR-T1000, £300

The first ever YouView product was worth the lengthy wait – this is a fine example of how to integrate broadcast telly and IPTV. We can't wait for a larger 1TB version, with built-in Wi-Fi, to surface

★★★★☆



Echostar HDT-610R, £260

While its IPTV talents need improving, the world's thinnest PVR – dubbed Ultra Slim Box by Echostar – performs solidly, offers a 500GB HDD, and can be installed practically anywhere in the house

★★★★☆

Top 5 SOUNDBARS



Yamaha YSP-2200, £800

Launched back in 2011, but still part of the Yamaha lineup, this premium-priced 'Digital Sound Projector' offers very effective virtual surround, a separate 100W subwoofer and 3-in, 1-out HDMI switching

★★★★☆



Boston Acoustics TVee M30, £450

Build quality is the order of the day here – Boston's 'bar/sub combi (designed for screens 40in and up) is beautifully designed and constructed. The wireless sub simplifies installation

★★★★☆



Orbitsound T12v3, £300

Another great-sounding 'bar from Orbitsound – this third-gen model features an improved subwoofer and internal components. 'Spatial stereo' processing widens your flatpanel's sound considerably

★★★★☆



Samsung HW-E450, £250

HDMI connectivity, wireless subwoofer hookup, Bluetooth streaming and USB file playback help this well-priced 'bar stand out from the crowd. Audio performance is solid, too – but lossless tracks aren't catered for

★★★★☆



Roth Audio Sub Zero, £150

This well-constructed soundbar eschews a dedicated sub (hence the name) in favour of a brace of 'ultra bass' drivers alongside six other speakers. Sound quality is expansive, with a tight low-end and impressive volume

★★★★☆

Top 5 SYSTEMS



Panasonic SC-BTT590, £630

The use of new bamboo/charcoal drivers and noise-shaping tech pays dividends here, with a classy sound quality to match the wealth of features (3D BD, Smart TV and more)

★★★★☆



Samsung HT-E6750W, £1,000

Samsung's pricey tallboy system uses a vacuum tube pre-amp to sweeten up its sound and offers virtual 7.1 from its five speakers courtesy of vertical-firing drivers. The feature count is extensive

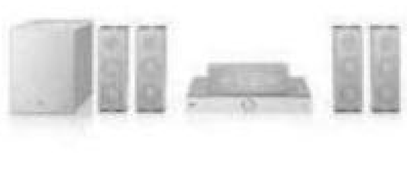
★★★★☆



Harman Kardon BDS470, £650

Harman's 2.1 system eschews 'net TV and streaming features but majors in heavyweight build quality and solid AV performance. We tested a 2.1 iteration – 5.1 is also available

★★★★☆



LG BH8220B, £650

With its silver finish, this is a suitable one-box system to partner with LG's flatscreen TVs, with a commendable, if slightly lacking in HF finesse, sound. Additional features including CD-ripping to USB. Handy

★★★★☆



Panasonic SC-HTB550, £400

This slimline 2.1 system can be clicked together to make a soundbar if you wish, but in its traditional form it makes for a neat stereo solution – and the wireless sub packs a hefty punch

★★★★☆

HOME CINEMA Choice

ISSUE #220 ON SALE April 4

→ IN THE NEXT ISSUE

Stream on! We show you how to make your own media player for just £50

The Hobbit: Unexpected journey from children's book to next-gen cinema release

Ambilight ambition: Philips' 2013 TV plans

→ ON TEST

Acoustic Energy 3-Series 5.1 speakers Cambridge Audio Azur 752BD Blu-ray player Marantz AV8801/MM8077 pre/power combi Yamaha RX-A820 AV receiver Projector grouptest JBL SB200 soundbar

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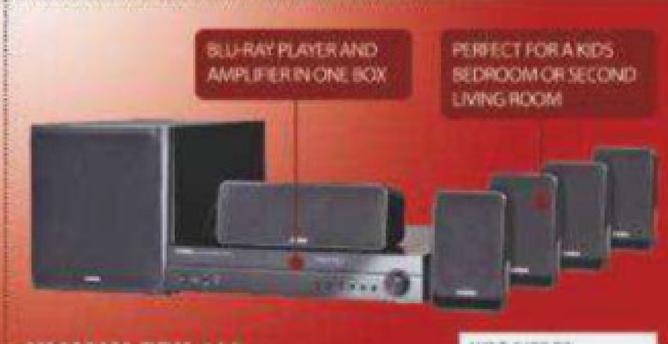
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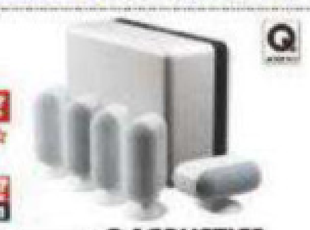
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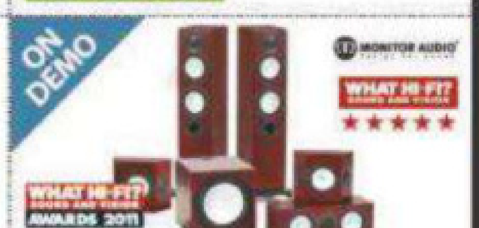
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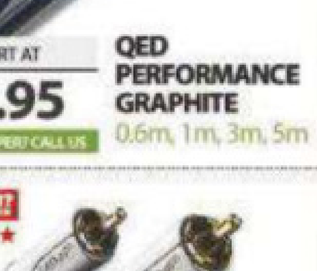
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Point of View

Always keen to maximise the potential of his home cinema setup, **Richard Stevenson** discovers that a 10-year-old idea still has a lot going for it

I SURPRISED EVEN myself at my most recent home cinema purchase. It wasn't another subwoofer designed to get Richter adding more digits to his scale. It wasn't a monster amplifier with enough power to wake Frankenstein's creation. It wasn't even very expensive. However, I expect this hardware device to be one of the most popular additions to systems for years to come. And it's a home theatre PC.

Now the concept of an HTPC is not new and I reviewed one of the first dedicated models, made by Uvem, the best part of 10 years ago. It was far from perfect. The interface was pure Windows (so required a mouse and keyboard), it was a big old chunk of kit, and the cooling fans would suck in passing cats. And back then, the top-spec Uvem maxed out at 1.4TB onboard capacity.

Fast forward a decade. Everyone has a PC at home, broadband of some sort and there is a plethora of movie streaming services available from sources both legal and dodgy. Most domestic PCs have plenty of storage and an HDMI output so why bother with a dedicated HTPC at all? Well, for convenience mostly – with performance romping in a close second.

An imperfect world

From personal experience, hooking up a laptop to an AV system is far from plug and play. There is the Windows 7 boot up, the log-in screen, the attempt at a network connection, anti-virus update reminders, Java updates, email notifications from Russian brides and a whole heap of background programs doing their best to slow things down. The keyboard and mouse interface is stuck to the hardware, which itself is tied to the system via HDMI. Then you will have to boot up a media program before realising that downloading *2001: A Space Odyssey* will take until 2020.

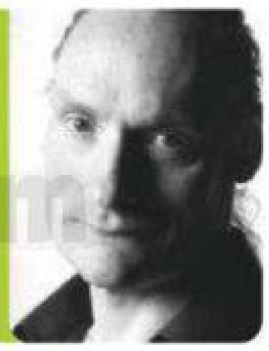
My main desktop PC is a more potent machine and can be left running to download movies and keep the updates, erm, updated. But many of the same issues apply and it's in a different room. Apparently, DLNA's idea of seamless connectivity means nipping back and forth between the home cinema room and the office, tweaking settings and getting frustrated until you finally get a picture on screen. Then, just as you get settled, the movie stops at the title screen menus. You have to go back to the PC to navigate a menu, delete an email from Natasha in Moscow and dispel a dozen pop-ups.

The good news is that an HTPC can be a thing of focus and purpose, fast and without bloatware. You don't even have to run Windows as there are plenty of slick media players that use Linux OS. Core processors don't have to be blisteringly quick, keeping costs and cooling to a minimum. A fast and silent SSD drive for the OS and hardwired NAS drive for content is ideal.

I went the Nettop route, an Arctic MC001, as it is small and silent. It's fed from a 4TB NAS drive, hardwired to the router and controlled by a wireless keyboard/mouse and XBMC's remote app. It is free of any software that isn't essential and can happily download movies while I'm working, asleep or trying to assure the cat it will be okay this time. I can output lossless audio over asynchronous USB for serious high-fidelity sound and its 1080p HD video is pretty good. Yet it's just as easy to stream video to my Oppo BD player for blistering performance.

So, a brilliant and cost effective purchase. I think I'll celebrate by buying another subwoofer... ■

Do you run a home theatre PC in your system? Let us know: email letters@homecinemachoice.com



We can assure concerned readers that **Richard Stevenson's** cat is indeed alive and well. To be honest, we're not even sure he actually has one

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